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WON BY A HEAD

A Novel.

BY

ALFRED AUSTIN,

AUTHOR OF

"THE SEASON," "THE HUMAN TRAGEDY," "AN ARTIST'S PROOF," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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WON BY A HEAD.

CHAPTER I.

DARKER THAN EVER.

It is an exceedingly disappointing and irritating thing, when you have taken a virtuous and self-denying resolution, suddenly to discover that you have taken it too late to do any good, or all the good at least which you expected from it.

Sir Everard had flattered himself, and not altogether without reason, that he was to be commended for his resolve, either to get Rosie Raffles away from the cottage, or himself to depart from The Hold. Dear old ladies, and very strict moralists, if I am fortunate enough to have any such among

my readers, will only remark that he was very much to be blamed for not having done so before. But, my severe, though beloved, female critics, remember that *he* had not brought her down to the neighbourhood, and for a considerable time had not at all encouraged her in remaining there. It is quite true that he did not positively send her away; but then, it may be pleaded in his excuse, that feudal rights no longer exist, and therefore it is not very easy to see how he could have done so. When, at length, he grew a little more tolerant, and went to see her every now and then, in her little woodland nest, he was pledged in heart and hand (you remember?), if not by lip, to Lily Swetenham. He loved and had the love of somebody else; and you know—for Mr. John Milton, as religious a man as such a questionable person as a poet can be, says so—"he who hath that" (he says "she," but it is all the same, surely?)—"he who hath that is clad in complete steel." His steel was so complete that all other passion's fires could make no impression upon him, and had as

little chance of melting him as have your material fires, by the aid of which you are reading me, of melting your bran-new bright steel fender. And when, eventually, he fell into the habit of going to see her every day, and riding with her, and—well, I own it—once only, once mind, having her (quite accidentally, too) to dinner, was not the poor fellow so miserable, so cut-up and lost, so thoroughly deserted and puzzled what to do with himself, by losing Lily, that you can afford to forgive him, if there really be anything to forgive, for his accepting comfort where he happened to find it? If you cannot, dear old lady, or frowning middle-aged maid, upon my word you are too hard upon him. Mrs. Pemberton would have forgiven him; though what Miss Kate or Miss Deborah might have said, I will not pretend to decide.

The moment, however, that he began at all to mend of his bad wound, and that the decline of his own disease permitted him to remark if anybody else had got a touch of the same or a kindred complaint, he was cunning enough to perceive that Rosie

showed symptoms, however slight, of a predisposition to catch something very like it, and straightforward and unselfish enough to resolve that she should at once have what is always recommended in such cases, viz. complete change of air. Unfortunately, however, before he had time to carry his excellent scheme into execution, she manifested suspicious signs of having already caught the infection.

No fault, or very small fault surely, of his. But not the less did he feel that disappointment and irritation alluded to in the first sentence of this chapter, consequent on the discovery that his praiseworthy intentions came too late to be entirely successful.

Nothing more of any consequence happened last night, after the curtain was so suddenly dropped by "Marie" being asked to lead away the other of the two women who had caused Rosie such a tremendous gallop on the chesnut. Sir Everard contrived, after a little scheming, alteration of position, coughs, breath-taking, and "theres," to disentangle himself from the young lady, who seemed to remember, even if you do

not, the remark he once made to her, that he "should imagine leaning was not so unpleasant a position." Judged by the length of time that she leaned, she must have found it an exceedingly agreeable, or an abnormally necessary, one. But even a woman cannot go on weeping for ever, and the most masculine frame has not quite such strong powers of endurance as an iron girder. And, therefore, though she was still very sad, and he still very tender and considerate, there was, at length, a little space between them, and again she talked of riding home. Being by this time of opinion that it was much the best thing she could do, but not at all altered in his proper resolve to ride with her, he ordered round the horses, and sent the groom on by a short cut.

Their ride was again by moonlight, beautiful, soft, sleeping moonlight, but now it was uneventful, and though they rode slowly, they rode quite silently till, as they neared the cottage, she said,

"We will not ride to-morrow, Sir Everard, please."

"Very well. And to tell the truth, I could not have done so, for I have promised my agent to go over to Stackingford by rail, and look at some outlying bits of property of mine; and that will occupy the whole afternoon."

"When are you going abroad?"

"I scarcely know."

They had both dismounted and were standing by the cottage door.

"Are you coming in?"

"Not to-night, I think. It is late."

"I shall see you soon, I suppose. Before you go abroad, at any rate."

"Why, of course;" and he laughed. "The day after to-morrow, probably."

"Good night, then."

"Good night."

And off he trotted, leaving the groom to lead home the chestnut.

The following afternoon he was riding over to the station whence he should start for Stackingford, a place but about twelve miles distant by train, though very awkward to get at by any other means. He looked at his watch, and was surprised to find that

it was only half-past two. The train did not go till ten minutes past three, so he had plenty of time and took it leisurely, thinking over what, even had he been more occupied, it would not have been so easy to chase altogether from his thoughts. But the station came in view. He put up his horse at the inn, and walked on to the platform. The porter touched his hat.

"Any luggage, Sir Everard?"

"No, I am only just going to run down to Stackingford. I suppose I am early."

"By what train, Sir Everard?"

"The three ten."

"You are late for that, sir! It must be almost three forty by this time. I thought perhaps you were going up the other way by the four five."

He pulled out his watch.

"Late!"

It stood at half-past two, just where it stood when he had looked at it before. He must have been very much distracted last night, for he had certainly forgotten to wind it up, and it had run down at a critical moment.

There was nothing else for it but to put such a good face on it as sensible men do put upon small disasters. He was not above a couple of miles from Pemberton's. He had not seen Philip for some little time. He would ride over and see if there were yet any news of Lily. At any rate, he would hear how things were going on at The Slopes.

Philip and his cousin Kate were in the shrubbery that lay between the gate and the house, and at once came up to him. The usual conversational salutations passed, and then they walked on.

"How is Mrs. Pemberton?"

"My mother is not very well, I am sorry to say. I fear you will not be able to see her to-day, Sir Everard."

"I am very sorry for that."

"I fear not," said Philip. "She is suffering from a neuralgia that nearly always attacks her at the fall of the leaf. . . . . There go Deborah and Tomlinson."

"Shall we call them?" suggested the cousin.

"I think we had better not," said Philip,

"unless Sir Everard particularly wishes it. The fact is, I believe there is love-making going on there, or something very like it."

"In that case," said Delafosse, "do not let us spoil sport."

"You must not believe it, Sir Everard," said Miss Langley with more annoyance than genuine scepticism in her tone. Deborah may be a little smitten, but Mr. Tomlinson is not a marrying man.

Her only reason for arriving at this conclusion being that, after every imaginable decent attempt upon her part to induce him to do so, he was not going to marry *her*. But then, Deborah had been making her little attempts at the same time, and she had youth—she was only thirty, Kate was thirty-four—strongly in her favour. And these were the modest young women who had been so hard upon poor Lily, and wanted to make out that Rosie was no better than a—well, never mind. But I very much question whether they were such close allies, and loved each other so dearly now as in the days when Lily had two lovers, and neither of them had one. *Idem nolle*,

both to want Lily not to marry Sir Everard, that, we can easily understand, would be productive of *firma amicitia*, the very closest and warmest friendship. But *idem velle*, both to want to marry the Reverend Augustus Tomlinson, that is quite another matter. That had not only been productive of no friendship of any kind, but had considerably relaxed the bonds of that sisterly affection and general front to the enemy, maintained when somebody else's feelings and not their own were the matter at issue.

Miss Langley had pretended to go and see whether Mrs. Pemberton could receive Sir Everard or not; but the fact that she did not return, rather raised the suspicion that she had left them, not so much for that purpose, as because she did not like the subject of conversation upon which they had fallen, but which, however, they abandoned the moment she left them.

"I wonder Kate has not returned," said Philip, as they entered the hall. "I will go and see, myself. Just go in here till I return, Sir Everard, will you."

The newspaper was on the table. He

had already read it; but, being in an uncomfortable frame of mind, he took it up mechanically and began looking at the advertisements, without paying them much attention. One of them at length attracted his notice. It was simply this:

"Shortly will be published, in crown 8vo, 2 vols., a new work by Ambrose Champion, entitled 'The Metamorphoses of Morals.'"

He could not help laughing, though he laughed neither ill naturedly nor scornfully. He had his own opinion about Champion's likelihood of success of any kind in this world, but he knew the man to be a good scholar, a tremendous bookworm, very industrious, and almost a thinker; so that his book, in any case, would not possibly be a subject for ridicule. But he laughed because the appearance of the work had been so long delayed, and he had so often bantered the author about it, and the very name given to it was one which he had himself, in a moment of frolic, half jokingly, half seriously suggested, on hearing the nature of its argument. However, the mighty work was coming out at last, and he should therefore

be sure soon to hear of its author. Recently he had heard nothing. But his own last letter, containing, as will be remembered, no fresh invitation to Batterton, had not provoked or required a reply.

Philip returned.

"My mother bids me give you her kindest regards, and tell you how much she regrets not being able to see you; but she is suffering so much that you must excuse her."

"Certainly, though I am very much grieved for the cause. What news from The Slopes?"

"None. We see much less of Mr. and Mrs. Swetenham, and he is so much altered you would scarcely know him. But it was only the other day that he told me again that he had complete proof that you know where Lily is."

"I wish to God I did!" exclaimed Sir Everard.

"I answered as much; and I verily believe that the comparative coolness between us all—of course we are good friends enough, but it is different from what it used

to be—arises entirely from our not believing that you know all about it, and our not acting heart and soul against you."

"And nothing more has been heard?"

"Not by me. What he may have heard—supposing that he has heard anything—he keeps to himself, beyond saying that you know perfectly well where she is. I suppose you are, in reality, just as ignorant as ever?"

"Completely. See!"—and Delafosse pulled out his pocket-book and opened it. "I never told you about these before, for I did not see what good I could do, and thought I might possibly do harm. Now I can do the latter no more than the former. The first of these I received the morning after she ran away, the second in the evening, at the bottom of St. James's-street. But she never came either there or to Northumberland-street, and I have never heard a word more."

"I should think she did not," said Philip, looking up and handing back the notes. "Do you know Miss Swetenham's handwriting?"

"I do, from these notes, but not otherwise."

"Then you do not know it at all. Those are not in her handwriting,"

"Are you sure?"

"Perfectly. You shall judge for yourself."

He went to a desk, unlocked it, and drew out a note, written in the old days, about some indifferent matter, but which poor Philip had prized as though it had been some precious Codex.

"That is her writing, see."

No two caligraphies could be more different. Hers was free and flowing; that hitherto supposed by him to be hers was straight, indeed almost leaning backwards, and cramped.

"Then she did not write them," said Sir Everard, astonished at a discovery which seemed to make ridiculous so much that he had done, and unjust so much that he had thought.

"She did not write them herself, that is quite certain," said Pemberton; but she might have got somebody to write them for her."

"But why should she get anybody to write them for her?"

"That is quite as impossible to answer as would be the further questions—Supposing she neither wrote them herself nor got anybody to write them for her, who wrote them? and why he or she wrote them?"

"Or indeed any other question about this strange and most impenetrable mystery." He drew a great breath. "Do you think she is dead, Pemberton?"

"I do not see how she can be dead as long as Mr. Swetenham talks as he does; for he must have heard of her in some way or other. He may have heard very little, but he could not say and suppose that he has proof of your knowing where she is without a reason for believing her alive."

The subject had been discussed so often, and ever with the same result, that they said no more, and Delafosse took leave. All the talk in the world merely ended by piling up a heap of contradictory possibilities, not any one of which had any advantageous probability over the other.

But when he was alone, and riding slowly along, he again began to meditate. His meditations were long, but their substance can be very briefly stated. If Lily got somebody else to write—for it was now clear that she did not herself write—the notes, she must have done it with the intention of deceiving him. If she knew nothing about them, and somebody else sent them—it was perfectly vain to try to inquire who—in order to mislead or fool him, in that case she had never communicated or tried to communicate with him at all since the day when she had bade him good-bye for ever, and could not, therefore, sanely be supposed to care anything about him.

How much did Rosie Raffles care about him? It was a very easy transition from one question to the other. If eyes, and lips, and hands, and tears, and all the organic mechanism by which people usually display, willingly or unwillingly, their genuine feelings could be trusted, she cared for him immensely. She also was going to run away from him, but not without telling him. She had given him fully to understand that

leaving him was terrible to her—was, as she had expressed it,—and it would be difficult to express a thing more strongly,—like going out of light into darkness. Was he really going to banish her into such outer mirk ?

And when she went into darkness, would she leave none behind her ? Should he not miss her at all ? He should miss her tremendously, there was no doubt about it.

Why, then, should she go ? She would stay but too willingly. Upon what terms ? That was a question which he did not ask himself, for the simple reason that, if she stayed now, it would never have occurred to him to offer her, or accept her on, any terms but honourable ones. He was not the man wittingly to make anybody his toy, and least of all anybody who loved him.

How we do allow trains of thought to lead us on ! What was there against her ? Nothing. She had done what most other women do not do—had given herself a certain amount of liberty, and not altogether hidden her feelings. Why should women be condemned to hide their feelings, except that it makes hunting their feelings, kicking

them up and winging them, stalking them, driving them, slaying them in covers, all the better fun for men, the legislators in such matters? There was no other reason that he could think of; and as for liberty, had he not been an advocate of its social extension all his life?

Where did she come from? She came from where most of us come from, for that matter, just as she would go where most of us go. Good Heavens! Was he going to the Heralds' College to know whom he might take to wife and whom not, and ask other people's approval before he pleased himself in a matter that concerned himself alone? And just fancy a man priding himself on being the descendant of such a line of losels as he had fairly enough sketched to Rosie when she had admired their portraits; the only good thing about them! Why, if her mother had been hanged, or her father hanged anybody else, she could not come of a worse stock than himself.

Had not his whole life, so far, been a consistent, if quiet, protest against all such social prejudices? And was he going ignomi-

niously to walk over into the other camp the moment that the question was no longer an academical one, but a practical question touching himself? If Rosie, as Rosie, pleased him, Sir Everard Delafosse, what other consideration deserved an unaffected honest man's notice?

It was a bold, reckless thing to throw a girl's love—and such love—back into her lap, and give her to understand that it was not wanted. Might he not come to want it some day, or some love like it, and be able to find neither? Women fall in love with men of thirty, but when they come to be thirty-eight, forty, fifty—eh? How then? If a man be not loved before then, he never will be; and unless, meanwhile, he have put money in his purse, women will be honest enough by that time not to offer him even the pretence of it.

But how about the estate and its encumbrances? He had set his heart on getting rid of them, and leaving clean lands to the next possessor, who would not be a Delafosse if he did not look out and get one brought into the world pretty soon. Rosie

made a considerable income by her pen, but he would have to stop that. He could stand a good deal, even to not knowing where his wife came from, but he could not have his wife publishing "Head over Heels" books, and stuff of that sort. We all have some social prejudices, and his seemed to lie in the literary direction. But though she would thus contribute nothing to his income, she would contribute almost as little to his expenditure, her tastes being, of necessity, inexpensive. One advantage in not marrying Burgundian blood, as against no advantage at all in doing so.

Was he, then, seriously thinking of closing with Rosie's offer—for surely it was such—of last night? This fine, strong, straightforward, well-bred, classical, fastidious gentleman was surely not going to end by mating with a——Well, I am not going to have her abused. But, after all, was she such as any of us—I, his biographer, or you, my reader—would like to see him married to? Was he really thinking of doing anything so very strange?

It is not easy to say what, on such occa-

sions, a man *is* thinking. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that he allows things to be thought about rather than thinks them, just as, when you are smoking, you permit yourself to wonder what being the Pope of Rome would be like; or, when you are knitting, whether you would much care to be Queen of Spain. Would you fight a duel if you could not help it, and would you murder your aged grandmother, who must die soon, in order to prevent her from disinheriting you? Such ideas will walk across the threshold of your brain, uninvited, especially if you happen not to be mounting guard at the door; and, once in, they are not so good to turn out.

But I rather suspect that they would very shortly have been turned out, or, at least not been tolerated in their attempt to make themselves so very much at home, and another fair, much fairer, face—where was it?—would have asserted itself to be, despite all that had occurred, the real mistress of that cerebral establishment, had he not found himself within bowshot of the cottage. He would go and see poor Rosie, at any rate;

it was only kind. He had missed his train; and, as she was not expecting him, it would be to her an agreeable surprise. He was in the woods, and a turn to the left, now within view, where (as there were so often in these woods) were four cross paths, would bring him in five minutes to her home. He rode on at a foot's pace over the turfy road, always soft and noiseless, but at this time especially so, and was within twenty-five yards of the turn he was going to take, when voices inarticulately reached his ear, and immediately two figures emerged from it. He must have communicated his own impulse to the horse very dexterously, for it stopped at once, and quite noiselessly.

He saw at a glance who it was. On the off side was Rosie, and on the side nearest to him Ambrose Champion, his right hand holding hers, and his left arm round her waist. He was bending down and towards her, and was speaking; but what he said it was impossible to hear. Taller considerably than she, and leaning forward, as men do when they are talking earnestly in such a position, he would have almost prevented

her from seeing up the road to the right, where Sir Everard and his horse stood motionless, even if she had thought of looking; whilst he himself was evidently too much occupied with what he was saying, to look at anything but her.

They crossed the path, slowly, very slowly, but without seeing him. If they only went walking straight on, he was safe. But if they turned! They would not be likely to cross the path again without noticing him. He dared not yet move or attempt to plunge out of the path among the trees, lest the noise of branches, very brittle now, should betray his presence. He strained his ears, and was very glad that no sound, either of feet or voice, now reached them. He strained his eyes, and every now and then caught, through the trunks and underwood, a glimpse of something that still moved onwards, and must, therefore, be her dress. He dismounted, and crept to where the paths met, and peeped cautiously round the one where he was, bridle in hand, up the path to his right, along which they had gone.

They had not turned. They had their backs to him, and, though still walking slowly, were by this time at least a hundred yards off. He might venture now. He vaulted again into the saddle. He crossed the path which they had taken, seeing, as he did so, that they were still walking on, stuck spurs into his horse, and rode for his life. The way was straight and had no fresh turn, right or left, for nearly half a mile, till it came to the identical cross paths where the chestnut had been startled and had run away with Rosie. If he could reach that without their returning and seeing him first, he was safe. He was close to it. He had necessarily to pull up a little in order to turn, since the roads were at right angles. As he did so, and glanced back, he caught a glimpse of colour not woodland, at the point round which, a couple of minutes ago, just before starting, he had peeped. They were going back to the cottage, but it was quite certain that they had not seen him, though they must have turned almost simultaneously with his breaking into the gallop in order to get away.

He rode straight home to The Hold. What did he think about matters now? He was rigidly determined not to think about them at all. These two knew each other, then, though each had simulated complete ignorance of the other? Why, he did not care to inquire, and he certainly would not have been any wiser if he had inquired. It was quite humiliation enough to have seen what he had seen without seeing anything more.

With all his readiness to regard Champion's learning and industry with respect, he had certainly, though half unconsciously, because without any question, regarded himself as a person of considerably more value. Was not Champion inferior to him? poorer, you know, older, not so good-looking, not so polished, captivating, and all that sort of thing. One whom he had been kind to, housed, patronised, laughed at. Where was the laugh now? I suppose Lord Hornsey would not feel very much flattered or proud of himself were he to notice traces of Silver the footman's powder lingering on her ladyship's left shoulder; and it was, perhaps, a little

mortifying for Sir Everard to think of where his own arm had been last night in this very library; indeed, his lips, for the matter of that. Bah!

It was perfectly clear now who the man was who had rushed out of the cottage that night and plunged into the wood, and whom she had not wished him to follow. Poor old Hannah was easily kept in the dark; and as for her own servant Grace—Sarah, in all probability—had not Rosie herself assured him that the girl was "devoted" to her? He should think she was. It was perfectly clear——He did not care what was clear; he should not bother his head about it. One thing was certain. He should start off the first thing in the morning, and go abroad at once.

Without communicating with Rosie? Certainly. He was not going voluntarily to humiliate himself further by letting either her or Champion imagine that he had seen them together, or knew anything about them. Champion might go to the deuce—where he came from—and take her with him, for anything he cared; and the best way

of rewarding her deceit was to leave, without a word, as though from sheer contempt or the desire to get away from a nuisance.

He would not wait till morning; he would start this very evening. He got his things together, and caught the train for London, and was smoking a cigar before midnight with Montagu Narracott, beautiful Countess sitting, just a little sadly, by his side.

"Why are you in such a hurry to go? Why not stay with us for a few days before starting?"

"I feel restless and must go. Why do not you come with me?"

"I wish we could. Town is terrible now."

"That is impossible, my boy, before spring. If she likes, we may then join you, if you are still on the Continent."

"I shall be delighted."

"And not a word about Lily?"

"Except this; that those notes were not written by her at all."

"Not written by her!" exclaimed Countess.

"I showed them to Pemberton only yesterday for the first time, and he told me at once, what of course I had never suspected,

since I had never seen her handwriting, and showed me an old letter from her, as different as possible."

"But she may have written in a false hand."

"Or she may not," said Montagu; "and if she did, why; and if she did not, why not, and so on, as we have asked a thousand times before."

"Exactly," said Delafosse. "I have quite given up speculating upon that subject."

"And hoping?" asked Mrs. Narracott.

"Not quite that, Countess! I permit myself to go on hoping in a hopeless, passive sort of way."

"And how is Rosie Raffles?" asked Montagu, smiling.

"Flourishing," he answered, the hypocrite. He could not bring himself to tell them anything about her.

"And still there?"

"Still there, or was yesterday."

"Going to remain?"

"I think not. She talked of leaving."

Countess could have put questions, not those clumsy masculine leading ones, which

he would have found much more difficult to answer. But though she was very kind to him to-night because he was going away to-morrow and she was very sorry to lose him, she was still on her dignity, and was not going to show the slightest curiosity about that young person.

"Has she been working hard?" Montagu continued.

"Awfully, I fancy. She is a wonderfully industrious little woman."

"She writes wretched nonsense."

"Perfect rubbish," added Countess, who really could not resist the opportunity of making *that* remark.

"I dare say she does," said Delafosse; "I never read her."

"But is she at all amusing?"

"Yes, old fellow, she's amusing enough for a time; but I don't think I shall see much more of her."

Montagu, who—to tell the truth—was, for himself and wife, immensely jealous of his friend's attention to anybody else, was too gratified to hear that Delafosse was not likely to see much more of her to wonder

why he was not likely. But women are a little sharper; and when the guest for the night had been seen to his room, and husband and spouse were alone in theirs, she at once remarked :

" Something has happened between Sir Everard and Miss Rosie, which he does not choose to mention."

" He is tired of her, I suppose."

" Scarcely that, perhaps. A man who could endure her at all—and any man whom she flattered as I am sure she has flattered him, could endure her—would endure her for a long time."

" She has been down there pretty long already ; some four months."

" Yes, but she would have been there longer—or rather, *he* would—if one or the other had not thrown up the cards."

" I am sure Everard had none to throw up," said Montagu.

And so they went on speculating till they dropped into sleep and silence. They rose up betimes in the morning to see their guest start, for he would not be persuaded

into postponing his departure by so much as a day.

"In the spring, then, I shall hope to see you beyond the Alps."

"You will still be there yourself?"

"Certainly. Good-bye, Countess; good-bye, Montagu, old boy!"

And four hours later, his native land was once more fading over the waters blue.

CHAPTER II.

WHERE IS LILY?

THERE is something peculiarly exciting in the straight carrying out of a sudden resolution, the making for some remote capital on the wings of the wind, the flushed start with the promise of supper in Bagdad on Tuesday se'nnight, or blushful Hippocrene when the young moon shows full. But there is another pleasure, less feverish but more profound, calmer but more prolonged; a pleasure ever deepening and widening with the diminishing distance, like the slow approach of graduated music; a pleasure carried about, dwelt upon, nursed, fondled, the last

sweet soporific when droppeth down the night, it may be among the mountains; the first hazy broadening sense of something worth waking to, blent with the flutter and fluster of eaves-loving swallows, it may be in some quaint gothic town; a pleasure which blends itself with the vesper cheroot, and draws out into longer, bluer, more filmy and ethereal trail its meditative fumes; a pleasure to be tasted thriftily, not greedily devoured and done with, but touched and put away again, thought over with very self-conscious satisfaction, egotistical congratulation, and unuttered joy. Such is the pleasure that may be yours, if, bent on remote city or summit, made sacred by human story, you tread your pilgrim's way slowly, slowly, never forgetting for an instant your one final object, but postponing it, putting it off by the delicious coquetry of wayside delays. Such pleasure was Sir Everard's when, bound once again for Rome, he indefinitely added to the luxury of a serene impatience by dallying in the cities which long ago she furnished with municipal freedom, or the valleys which she

of old parcelled out among her victorious cohorts.

How long this intentional dalliance might have continued I scarcely know. A St. Martin's summer settling on the Lago Maggiore kept him a happy prisoner at the charming lake-side inn at Baveno, just under the shadow of Monterone, and set him of a morning rambling toward secluded Orta, or of an evening rowing in and out between the Beautiful Island, its worthy parent, and the homes of the lacustrine fishermen. When the moon was low, but rising, and the simple upland folk came trudging down to make their round of the Stations of the Cross in the three-sided open corridor of the little chapel afront the water, he would mingle with them, and wonder how the same devotion would sound in the Basilica of Constantine. But St. Martin's summer, even in Northern Italy, is but a bird of passage, and its sunny plumage soon swept away beyond the horizon. He was pelted by the rain into Milan, and pelted by it on to Turin. Snowed-up for a fortnight, he escaped at its

close to Genoa, which he had last seen in the glorious glow of an autumn equinox. Now, the narrow streets were dismal and sloppy, and he was glad to be rowed in an open boat, in the height of a sleet-storm, to a steamer that puffed aloud its intention of making for Civita Vecchia. Sitting under Count Borromeo's exotic foliage, he had dreamed pleasant purposes of October travel by the "defiles fatal to Roman rashness;" of watching the mellowed foliage float down the cataracts of Terni; of indolent lolling over the tumbled ramparts of Perugia; of drinking a libation of its purest water to the fallen fortunes of Clitumnus; and of leaning—at last!—from the bending declivity of La Storta upon the sudden-bursting haven of his journey. Such dreams are pleasant, even when not realised, and though they should end in a dull steamer, duller railway, an hour's oscillation along an uninteresting road, and an entrance into the Eternal City by its worst and least sacred slums. Enter not Rome, if you can avoid it, by so miserable an approach. Rather let the Claudian Aqueduct

draw you, with its gaunt, shrunk limbs, a fitting cicerone to the land of tombs. Entering by the Porta Maggiore, or the gate of the Lateran, even the boastful façade of the splendidly-situated Basilica of St. John will but convince you, at first sight, how vainly, for all the assistance of the centuries, Christian has struggled against Pagan Rome.

It was the eighth of December. The skies were blue overhead, and the ways clean underfoot, and the procession of the Immaculate Conception swept by with its long trail of surplices, its strange dissonance of chants, and blare of dripping candles, as Sir Everard was leaning nigh the column of Phocas, and restoring, for his own satisfaction, the portico of the Dii Consenti. Thus disturbed, he turned up the Via Sacra, passed without entering the Orti Farnesiani, and sought an adjoining portion of what is left of the Palace of the Cæsars, where excavations have been fewer, and those plants which seem to thrive only on the tombs of civilisation lord it undisturbed. To him it was well-known ground, and he

preferred it, because he knew he should probably, have it all to himself.

It is the only spot in Rome which still thoroughly wears the aspect of hopeless and permitted decay. He entered by the Via dei Cerchi. No usual custode, bearing the badge of his office and looking keenly after his fee, opened him its miserable door. A scranny hand pulled at a long rope carried along a precipitous and tumble-down staircase, a trembling figure greeted him on its summit, and a poor thin voice answered his salutation with the details of the intermittent fever that had clung to her, she said, ever since the autumn.

He dropped a couple of pauls into her furrowed palm, and passed through tangled brushwood into heaps of stone and rubbish, shot there by the centuries. Elsewhere the hedger and ditcher have been at work, mosaic pavements have been scraped more or less clean, halls have been, if not reconstructed, at least cleared out, and had their antique proportions exposed to divination, and pillars, though shattered, have been re-

erected, so as to show what or what like they once upheld. But there the wreck of distant, and the superimposed disregard of nearer, centuries have been left unhampered in their stern work of desolation. It is only when, after long wandering and stumbling, you at last arrive at the summit of this rubbish-ridden enclosure, that the mass of masonry and earth, and the sobering if still more confusing foliage, permit you to attempt anything like retrospective organisation. Even when you have done your most skilled, your notions will remain, like that out of which they have attempted to educe order, little better than chaotic.

But what a prospect rewards your patience from that long broad roof of mingled loam and masonry, decorated with thriving winter leafage! The Forum is hidden in its hollow by the intervening Palatine, but the tower of the Capitol is at your back, and visible if you turn. Immediately below, on the left, is the Circus Maximus, now partly doing duty as the domain of a gas company. Beyond it is the grand old hill of Secession, where the church and convent of Santa

Sabina have replaced the temple erected by Camillus, Sassoferrato's St. Catherine of Siena superseded Juno Regina, and the lemon-tree planted by Dominic is a sorry substitute for the Library of Varro. Even though Il Priorato be an improvement upon the shrine of Ovid's Bona Dea, the Aventine seems most of all the hills to have lost its character through the injurious indifference of Time. But turn your gaze to the north-east, over as much of the Colosseum as you can descry, away over the Esquiline and the Baths of Titus, to the confronting turret of St. Mary Major, and let it travel back by the gate of San Lorenzo, and avoiding, if possible, a sight of the railway, move along the Claudian Aqueduct till this breaks short at the Villa Massimo, and leaves you in contemplation of the figures that almost seem to wave over the front of the Lateran. A move of the eye will show you, within easy distance, the still gigantic Baths of Caracalla, and, receding beyond your power of sight, the solemn tombs of the long straight Appian Way. Ruins and fragments of ruins are right, left, near, far, all around you. Go

there when the sun is low, and look out to the Sabine Hills, the gentlest of their kind, and confess to a feeling which is not melancholy, nor religion, nor gratification, but a something unutterable, which circumfuses, pierces, and transports you, which troubles you as you gaze, which rivets you as you think to leave, which follows you long after you have ceased to stare, which may, perhaps, be expressed by a sigh, but by a smile would be preferred.

This was the spot which first drew Sir Everard's footsteps, and whither they often returned. Did he love it? No. Did he dread it? No. What was its fascination? Ah! who does not know it? It presented the ideal of his real condition: the fascination of the something forbidden to our want, the cup proffered to our lips athirst, and then withdrawn, not from sight, but from taste; the something not too vast for our desires, but infinitely too large for our embrace; the impulse of the poor vacant arms towards the form too ethereal for their caress; the hunger of the heart for less earthly food; the panting

of the poor disfranchised soul for the limitless freedom which it has never forgotten, and will never cease to reclaim. When the chrysalis shall no longer feel for the purple imponderous wings, man shall forego his craving for the pinions with which he may perhaps flee away, but (let him not delude himself) never be at rest.

Nearer to his woe, and perhaps profounder in his personal feelings, than was the mighty poet whose fame will survive even the city which he alone could adequately sing, Sir Everard Delafosse could not, even on such a shrine, forget his grief. Indeed, it seemed to assume, for the first time, its full and proper proportions, and come home to his hitherto diverted consciousness with plenary pain. All else was forgotten. He thought not of The Hold. Batterton woods were dim and distant, and the cottage had faded out of sight. No Champion was present to his mind, no Rosie invaded the solitude of his reflections. Philip Pemberton he might never have known; even Philip's placid mother mingled not with these apparently still more placid monuments of age the

beautifier. Mr. Swetenham might never have either entertained or ostracised him, and Rymington Tower and the green graceful Slopes never have felt his footstep or gladdened at his voice. He had but one remembrance, and that was of Lily; or rather, it was scarcely a remembrance, since it never associated itself for an instant with the scenes or circumstances in which he had known and loved her. It was not a remembrance at all, but a presence, or the painful absence of a presence that was not here corporeally, and yet was truly here in some finer immaterial sense. He would stand on the very spot which I have just described, looking abroad over the Roman circle—the whole of which can thence be commanded—over the records of the most important period of pathetic human history, and only exclaim, "Where is Lily?"

He would sit on a broken flora-cushioned column of the Colosseum, when there were long dark shadows, mournful foliage, the silence of the stars, intermittent owl-eries, the melancholy moon seen and lost among the cracks of Time, amidst all the

nocturnal sorrow and sacredness of this the most awful ruin upon earth, and only wonder, "Where is Lily?"

He would come again when there was no moon, no mystery—when there were no black shadows, no weird darknesses, no startling apparitions of light, no stars, no night necromancies. It might be early afternoon, when there was a soft, sunny, January air, a sky of lapis-lazuli, a twitter of birds, a hum of insects, a smell of bursting buds, but he still could only lean silently and think, "Where is Lily?"

He would wander farther away, where baths whose water flows no more, where niches without statues, columns that support nothing, roses springing through clefts in mosaic pavement, halls without garniture, arches whose foundations are more than sapped, fanes without altars, huge walls of masonry in which the myrletus places its seed and the martin its eggs, and insect hum and bird twittering are all the language life now utters within its precincts, go to make the Baths of Caracalla the calmest of noonday refuges, and would break upon the

stillness of the place and hour with the one wild, passionate question, "Where is Lily?"

He would fall into converse with some sandalled religious telling his beads by the Meta Sudans, and listen quietly to the monk's gossip of how the demoralising spectacles of the Flavian Amphitheatre came to end, by the arrival, in the fifth century, of an Eastern cenobite called Telemachus, who made an express pilgrimage to Rome in order to destroy these sanguinary shows, and who was stoned, like Stephen, but, like Stephen again, not stoned in vain; and, instead of criticising this pleasant fiction and asking that worthy bald old head if it had ever heard of Salvian, who complains bitterly, much later than the fifth century, that the Christians had an awful passion for gladiatorial spectacles in which they were no longer the victims, he would find himself on the verge of asking if he knew "Where was Lily?"

Anon he would turn and return to the spot which Shelley said made him almost in love with death, and where he at least is at peace with all things under the long, broad,

triangular shadow of the monument of Caius Cestius and his precious heart—Cor Cordium, as it is written on the marble slab —has turned the Protestant cemetery into a perpetual place of pilgrimage. He found the tomb sorely neglected; and though withheld for a time by a dread of impertinent profanation, he could not resist the impulse to see to the gravestone being cleansed, the roses being brought into subjection, and fresh violets being planted. That done, he could find there no further office but that of repeating to the dead what he dare not ask of the living, "Where is Lily?"

Once or twice, from sheer weakness, he was pressed into yielding consent to be seen at the gatherings of his countrywomen, who, finding victims on the Pincian, and expanding in an area where the competition is not so keen as in Tyburnia, are delighted to be able to dispense with the expensive apparatus of Persia and yet to be famous for the winter in the English Rione Campo Marzo. A scudo's worth of flowers, a couple of robust tenors got for nothing, a few ices from Nazzari, and the thing is done. Once,

too, might he have been seen at an entertainment of a more sumptuous character, given by a pleasant priest, who had got his hat and been made a cardinal. Monsignore had thrown open all his rooms, or all somebody else's, had dressed himself in his sweetest scarlet, had invited his new hatful of distinguished people, princes, excellencies, counts, cavaliers, soldiers all crosses, churchmen all colours, ladies of high degree bediamonded and be-pearled till one's eyes ached again. But British mothers had not campaigned in vain, and had flooded with their fluttering broods the comprehensive and communistic reception. He was some time in getting down stairs again, looking into each fresh face with a singular, uncomprehended stare, but which really meant, "Why is not one of you Lily?"

Then he was seen no more amid such assemblages; and his countrymen, who had striven to know him because he had a small title, said that he really was not worth knowing; and his countrywomen, who had all sent him invitations and pressed him to their houses for the same excellent reason,

wondered aloud to each other how it was that he could not get into society.

He, meanwhile, was dreaming, and right glorious dreaming was there to be had, the soft March afternoons, on the architectural boulders of the Nymphæum of Alexander, or amid the sturdy shadows of the walls of Honorius. But at last the melancholy musing grew too sad to bear, and he flung himself into the saddle, fain to gallop beyond the beautiful but depressing desolation of the city wherein he began to suspect he had already stayed too long. Yet many a bound would a better steed than his have got to make, before he gained a neck on the giant untiring stride of the arches of the Claudian Aqueduct, or reached the ever-receding goal of the mournful Appian Way. And even then what had he gained by distance? He still demanded in vain, the "Where is Lily?"

He looked around. A vast monotonous plain, almost more ruined than the streets which he had left behind him. The tinkle of sheep-bells, and here and there a miserable hut, were all to tell him that man had not

quite abandoned it. But the untilled ground had broken into spontaneous and gladsome flowers. He was riding over violets, anemones, and asphodels. The sky was a bluer blue, the air soft as a mother's palm on an aching brow, or a child's kiss when it wants to be forgiven. Tivoli was snugly nestled, but visible withal, in the bosom of the soft Sabine Hills. High up, ever so much nearer heaven, shone the white monastery of Monte Cavo, with the black precipitous Rocca di Papa hard below. Clouds were there none, but the bold Alban mountains made their own deep shadows. Lark pursued lark in melodious eddies upwards from the pinched ground to the bright blue sky which needs no human ploughing to be beneficent. Idly rocking in his saddle, he surrendered his senses to the soft blandishments of that sensuous air, to the azure profundity of that imponderous sky, to the magical rejuvenescence of multitudinous flowers, to all the abounding beauty and intoxicating joy of warmth, colour, music. He was responding to the vernal jubilation of loosened petal and enfranchised wing, and thanking God

for—when, "For the love of the Madonna and all the saints, just a baiocchino, una cosetta, per carità," from the mouths of wretchedly clad and barely-fed children of shepherds worse off than their flocks, shattered his luxurious dream. Yes, there were baiocchi in handfuls, and let them be happy, and he would change them into scudi, if they would but tell him, Where was Lily?

Away, away to the slopes of Castel Gandolpho! Away from the strong broad shadow of inevitable blight that stretches from the defiant ruins right athwart the circumambient plains to the bases of the retreating mountains! There, if the peasant begged, it was from soft habit, not from hard want. Sufficiently withdrawn from Rome, he found God's world resume its customary fertility. The fig fastened on the soil where Frascati still preserved the memory of philosophic Tusculum. The patriarchal olives struck deep into the rich brown clods that slope down from Alba Longa to Porta d'Anzio and the indolent sea. Where are there woods sweeter or more umbrageous than Lariccia's, where vineyards better tilled

than the undulating ranges topped by Monte Giove? But longer waxed the shadows, more distinct the horizon landmarks. If he was to sleep in Rome, he must turn head and make straight for the arches of the Acqua Felice. What a sundown! what a twilight! Was that verily a city he was approaching? Were those walls there the tombs of the departed? Archways and parapets, domes and campanili, ivied battlements, solitary pines, in a soft suffusing purple sea of expiring light—he almost doubted of the reality of them all. But the bells of Ave Maria grew more audible. Romans were singing under Roman walls. Shoals of young priests were hurrying to their homes. Brown overtook him at the Grotto of Egeria; Alice had had such a charming ride; Sir Thomas saw nothing in the Arco del Corvo. "Little Toddlekins" was going to be acted at the Dressingtons' that night, the last of the Carnival; would he not go? Yes, anywhere, everywhere, if only there he could meet with Lily!

The Forty Days had commenced; cardinals had had ashes put upon their fore-

heads, had been reminded that they too are but dust and unto dust must return, and had gone away very humble. The theatres were all closed, *ristoratori* could no longer provide meat for their customers except in private rooms, so that all the world might see that Rome was the capital of Christendom. Tall, imposing men had come forth from the mountains, in their full religious habit, mounted church pulpits, and were thundering out doctrines more like those of St. John the Baptist than one often hears, drew great crowds, and moved to tears. What wonder? They had been thinking out terrible exordiums and plaintive perorations in the monastic solitude of Apennine heights, or the awful shades of Adriatic woods, and they had descended upon the thoughtless city in the might of their convictions and passionate pleadings for dread things forgotten. They planted themselves by the large wooden cross in the centre of the Colosseum; they clasped it, appealed to it, would tear it from its solid base, and place it on the soft shrinking shoulders of their worldly hearers. These they sum-

moned to follow, there and then, the Via Crucis, and at each station halted, dragging after them rustling satins, undulating lace, ay, and French uniforms. They made them all kneel on the bare ground, and own in unison that the earth is a poor passing show, nothing worth, a very lazar-house of filthy vanities, a donjon, a penitential cell, and that to make merry in it was to be simply stark staring mad, and nothing less. Sir Everard followed in the wake of the sinning and repenting multitude, and heard it all, but did not join in it, and could only weakly wearily wonder if Lily was making merry in it somewhere, if she were stark staring mad, or if rather she were not carrying her cross, and found it oh so heavy to bear!

The days grew longer and sunnier, and riding among the cork woods above Acqua Certosa was now sheer paradise. He rubbed up his classics, revisited Veii, Fidenæ, Antemnæ, Gabii, and breathed nectar. He wanted no rose-leaves to be luxurious, for he felt himself to be a Sybarite even in the saddle. Busy pious hands of world-eschewing nuns were at work at Santa Agnese with

the palm-branches sent across sea by the monks of Lebanon, delicately twisting them for the Sunday when they would be blessed by the Servant of the Servants of God. It was here: it was over. So was Holy Week. The Church triumphant was filling the air with music, she was jubilant and chanting alleluiahs. High in the air, on the shoulders of men, she had placed her pontiff. Silver trumpets, beautiful, soul-entrancing, cherubimic trumpets, were announcing his paternal coming. *Urbi et Orbi!* Blessing on the City and the World! Except to the Colonna. Once on a time, near old Prænestе, Stefano Colonna struck Boniface the Eighth, and duly in that castle as the midnight hour comes round, a priestly figure clad in the robes of the altar, enters the yet unruined chapel, ready to celebrate the mass. There is no acolyte, so he turns him round, walks back to the sacristy, and disappears. And so will he come, and so the terrible exception to benediction continue, till some Colonna, belted and booted and spurred, shall take heart and go and "serve" that midnight mass in their tower nigh to Palestrina. Till

then, they are all accursed; and when the words of blessing are uttered at noon on Easter Day from the balcony of St. Peter's, not a house belonging to the Colonna but shakes from roof to basement. Were you a Colonna, would you go and serve that mass? Would Sir Everard go? Ay, to all the midnight towers and ghost-haunted chapels in the shaggy Apennines, so only the curse upon him could be removed, and he might have the one blessing for which alone he craved. He had been sorely tempted and provoked, but he had not struck old Swetenham. Yet, no less than the Colonna was he banned, and when the words of the efficient benediction floated over the Piazza, they passed him by, and left him still with his unanswered plaint: Where was Lily?

He would go. Rome ancient crushed him, and modern Rome was more than hateful, and neither gave him what he sought. Why wander again through galleries the richest, most extensive, and most interesting, but withal the most wearying in the world? He began to sigh for the Pitti or the Ufizzi. They were not so vast as the

Vatican, they were not so marvellous, but they would satisfy, for they were at one with themselves. Hither architects, sculptors, painters and decorators, had been summoned from their Tuscan or Transalpine homes by soft speeches and promises of solid gifts. When the time had at length come round for Rome to assume a different but still more pretentious sceptre than in the triumphant pagan days, and it seemed but becoming that she should have palaces, museums, and churches commensurate with her arrogated supremacy, she had been obliged to crave for Umbrian devotion or Tuscan subtlety wherewith to carry out her superb designs of restored dominion. They had come in myriad answer to her call, but her vulgar vainglory had seemed to paralyse their work. The hand so crafty in Pisa or Perugia, lost all its cunning in the capital of Peter. In vain did the brains which had watched over the conception, or the fingers that had wrought the execution, of the Duomo of the City of Flowers, struggle to surpass or reproduce the glories of Apennine-girt piazzas. Venice had long boasted her Saint Mark.

Milan's beautiful turrets went up like incense or morning orisons to a more inclement sky. Genoa was commencing to be as famous for her marble palaces as for her heavy galleys. Padua and Ferrara were homes of politest learning and severest taste. Even high-perched Spoleto and Arezzo opened exquisite doors upon enclosures of architecture as artistic as it was devout. But Rome had neither church nor palace nor municipality to satisfy either the artist or the devotee. Art abounded within her walls, but only in the shape of ruins or of excommunicated gods. She grew tolerant and cultivated these, collected the nymphs and satyrs of a greater time, and resolved to have magnificent and pretentious what she could not have original and unique. Littleness on a large scale was her ambition; and a temple without tenderness, and a museum without unity, set her longings at rest. Individual wealth had been the means, individual glorification was the purpose, of these costly collections by a succession of vainglorious hierarchs. Neither the articles themselves, nor the halls wherein they were enshrined,

were the natural products of the place which bases its importance on their display. Princes, who in deference to the softer temper of the times were beginning to abandon the castle for the palace, might expend in soft warm gilding what had formerly been spent upon hard cold steel. Opulent priests might move their residences from the sanctuary door to the suburban villa, and invest in mosaics what their predecessors had lavished on the poor. But neither carpet knights nor courtly cardinals could evoke, amid the ruins of Rome, the spontaneous powers with which Florence had beautified herself, and was ready to adorn the capitals of less fertile lands. Florence had given the go-by to antiquity; and scorning imitation in any walk, had struck out new paths for herself, and succeeded unapproachably in all. Why not go to Florence?

He had now been, and not for the first time, four months in Rome, and at what conclusion had he arrived? If a man be an idler or a flippant, he will find tomfooleries enough there to satisfy him; if a virtuoso, medals and coins and inscriptions abound; if a dilettante

or a dreamer, he will recognise it as his natural home; if he is to leave his sign-manual on his time, he must go there by all means, but look and pass; if he is to be an artist, he must not go there at all, or he is eternally undone. These were his thoughts, and his wants the one wild want with which he had come, and with which, unsatisfied, it seemed he must depart.

When Donatello gave the last stroke to one of his statues on Giotto's Campanile at Florence, "Parla!" he exclaimed. "Speak!" Why, his whole city speaks. Never was there such a fluent host, but delicate withal, as Florence. She bids you welcome, straight; asks what ails you; shows how she has a past much richer, and therefore more perplexing and provocative of regrets than yours, but, for all that, a thriving, practical, yet gentle present, and won't you stay and make yourself happy and become wise in it?

But, Rome! Come if you will, go if you will; stay, stand, and stare; be happy or profoundly miserable; what can it matter? Here are ruins and tombs, and make the

most of them. Her solid, stupendous Colosseum, the longer you stare at it, becomes more and more a shadow, not a substantial thing; her Columbaria are ghosts, her Thermæ the fabric of a vision, herself a nightmare jumble of sewers and sepulchres.

He had started. He had passed through the gates where Belisarius begged. He wanted to go back. How strange! He felt as though he was leaving Lily behind, not alive, and not dead, but half as though they had both been buried by mistake and he had risen and she had not. But the vetturino was cracking his long whip more and more, and Soracte was in sight, and he had slept at Narni, and Thrasymene was behind, and lovely faces were on the road, but none of them was Lily's, and speech became more classical, and salutations more frequent, and villas were everywhere, and the sun was just setting, and there—there below, swimming in a golden atmosphere—was the Beautiful City, the City of Flowers!

CHAPTER III.

A STATE OF NATURE.

"O *mamma mia!* such a nice time we have had. I acted so well, and got such lots of applause, and everybody was so pleased, and it was delightful, and we are going to do it all again next week."

These words came running from one of the prettiest mouths of one of the prettiest faces belonging to a girl of nearly seventeen that ever burst, as she had just burst bringing sunshine with her, into a room. Her look, like her speech, was innocent and simple as a child's; and, child-like again, she thought more of being near "mamma mia"

than of being graceful or effective when, after more of a hug than a mere kiss, she crouched down on the very floor at her mother's feet. Seventeen years are few for a maiden, but Leonilda Benvenuto had all the roundness and bloom of cheek, all the smoothness of skin, all the unstudied brightness of eye, all the talk and attitudes of a girl of seven. She was talking English without the slightest taint of foreign accent, but that would not help you, you would have felt at once, to settle the question of her race; and though the mere introduction of "mamma mia" into her discourse might have been attributed by you to the mere fact of her being in Florence, the "nice time" never heard this side the Atlantic except in the mouth of those who come from the other, would have left you hopelessly puzzled.

"And oh, Regina! dear Mr. Pomeroy brought such a handsome man, and so clever, and introduced him to us when it was all over."

"I do not think he was so handsome, Leonilda! And as for cleverness, I don't

see how you could judge in so short a time."

These words were spoken by a young fellow who had entered the room immediately after, but less boisterously than Leonilda, and had evidently been her escort home from the theatre. Doubtless he was her lover, and we should be still further driven to such a supposition by his objection to hearing any other man called clever and handsome in a breath.

"Short a time!" she answered. "I danced with him twice, *mamma mia*, and he said I danced very well, and he ought to know, for I am sure *he* does."

"They had a dance and *I* was not there!" said a voice from a sofa in a dark corner of the room, and immediately an exquisite figure came out into light. "How unfortunate I am! They never dance when *I* go. But you're so pretty, Hilda, and you have a lover——Look at Harry—he is blushing! —— and a watch, and everything. Poor me!"

There could be no doubt that this second girl was thoroughly sincere in the hostile

criticism upon herself, which was implied by the words, "*you're* so pretty," addressed to the first. But most men, and a good many women, would at once have looked from one to the other and challenged the decision. Probably it was one of those family opinions which are never questioned in the family, but are a source of much wonder aside.

She had, by this, emerged enough into the centre and full light of the room, for her face to undergo that examination which had been fully satisfied, by a glance, at her perfect figure, seen in the corner and the darkness of it as she had risen from the sofa. Leonilda was so entirely infantine in her appearance, that this her sister would at once have been set down as considerably the senior; not that she looked older than she really was, but that the other looked, and talked, and moved so much younger. But in reality she was the second of the two by nearly an entire year. It was but three days ago that she had been delighted to be able to call herself sixteen.

What an interesting face! And yet inte-

resting only to those who love and are able to read characters already traced, but withal as yet indistinctly. Her heart and soul were written legibly enough thereon for those who are skilled in deciphering very faint traces, but others would have to wait till they were held to the fire of life and brought out more visibly by its heat. Her eyes were brown, and sometimes, as at this moment, almost enormous, and the strongly-defined brows above, instead of distracting attention, only called it to them more. Her forehead lay fallow and untouched, but underneath it were wonderful possibilities. She scarcely knew what to do with her light brown hair, there was so much of it, and now it was a little tumbled by her late siesta. Her mouth had the most singularly mixed expression of maidenly modesty and of human yearning that can be conceived; and, looking at her intelligently, you could not help the belief, the fear, almost the dread, that her life would be either one long contest of herself against herself, or a tumble, and then an end. As she spoke the last words, "Poor me!" with her figure at rest,

her arms extended fully downwards, her hands clasped, her head just a little on one side, and her large eyes looking envyingly though lovingly at Leonilda, she seemed more as though the crowning disappointment of some long expectation had fallen upon her rather than that she had merely missed a few unpremeditated dances on the sloping boards of a private theatre.

"You will have plenty of dancing to-morrow, Regina dear; we will all go to cousin Mildred's," said the mother.

"Yes, so we shall, shall we not, Hilda?" And she stooped down and kissed her sister, cast aside all her air of sorrow, and became what she had hitherto scarcely seemed, one of the four.

"And what was he like, the gentleman that Mr. Pomeroy brought? Was he introduced to cousin Mildred?"

"*Altro!* Of course. O, he is so handsome, and he's a baronet."

"A baronet! Our little Hilda dancing with a baronet!" And Regina jumped and laughed. "Did he say you were very pretty?"

Leonilda blushed all over her pretty face as though she were teazed by a man instead of by her own sister.

"Doesn't she talk nonsense, *mamma mia?*"

"But you *are* pretty. But what was his name, Hilda?"

"Sir Everard Delafosse."

"What a grand name! And does that mean baronet in England?"

"I believe so," said the young fellow whom she called Harry. "I did not see so much to rave about in him. He is tall, and decent-looking, that is all."

"Harry is jealous."

"Be quiet, Regina!" said her mother.

"You are not angry, Harry, are you? Well, if you are, I will teaze you more. O, what a moon!" and she rushed to a little door that opened on to a balcony, below which was a garden where, though within the walls of the city, the Tuscan nightingales had already, the first week in April, began their transitory song.

The next day was Sunday; and just at that hour when the leafy Cascine is the gayest,

and the north side of the Lung' Arno the most thronged, Delafosse was descending upon Florence through the *Poderi* that lie to the south-west of the Porta Romana, and was threading his way by the deep-set stream that, kindly halting a moment to make a couple of large water-troughs, where a marvellously handsome contadina that I wot of still sturdily washes sturdy linen, pursues its flower-guarded course between the Ombrellino and the Villa Giglione. He was not alone in his rapid descent over sods exuberant with violets, primroses, anemones, lilies, tulips, the spray of every root and bulb that flings its wave of life, as spring comes round, against the imprisoning turf. In front of him, and evidently giving the pace, was a man some twenty years his senior. They could not walk abreast, for the path, where there absolutely was one, was too narrow, and they had ever and anon to dip to avoid the overhanging branches of the olive, whose fruit already began to show, to push aside the pink and white blossoms of the almond, to dodge the broad foliage of the fig, or spare the new green shoots of

the supple-straying vine. But they went on talking all the same.

"You must come to-night, Delafosse."

"Must I? I never go out, you know."

"But you enjoyed yourself last night, did you not? You said so."

"And I did, I must own. That little girl was perfectly charming; what is her name?"

"Benvenuto; Leonilda Benvenuto."

"But she is not Italian, surely? Only on the father's side, I suppose."

"Only partly on that," said Mr. Pomeroy. "I really do not think her father had much of Italian about him beyond his name; but I speak only of what I have heard. I never knew him."

"He is dead, then?"

"Yes, years ago."

"And her mother?"

"Is alive, and lives in Florence."

"Is she a widow?"

"No, she married again when they were quite children."

"Whom do you mean by they?"

"I forget; you did not see them both last night. But there is another daughter, younger than Leonilda, much cleverer, and whom, I should think, you would consider still nicer."

"Almost impossible. My little partner took my fancy enormously. It was more like meeting a fresh human species, than merely a girl or a new acquaintance. I never met such fresh simplicity in my life."

"Is it not? The other is not so simple, but quite as captivating in her way."

"And the mother has married again, you say."

After being roughly barked at by a big white watch-dog, who tugged at his chain as though he would give anything to be at them, they passed out of the podere, through large lubberly gates, into the stony road, just where, leaving the little Villa Grossi on the left, and sweeping by a fresco of the Madonna on the wall, it turns sharply round to run down to the road to the Roman Gate. Once abreast, Delafosse passed his arm through that of his companion, and so they

walked on, soon entering the city, and continuing their course along the Via dei Serragli.

"And a very decent fellow, called Vanari. He is very handsome and very vain, but I do not know that he has any other faults," said Pomeroy, laughing; "unless it be poverty."

"They are poor, then?"

"They ought not to be, but I fear they are a little straitened just at present. He never had anything, even when she married him, a dozen years ago, for his good looks. She had a fair fortune, but somehow or other I fancy it has been ruinously invested, and for the present they are rather pinched."

"What does he do?"

"What most Italians in his position do—nothing, or nothing that is visible. He is a social sort of fellow, and liked by most people, and goes out a good deal."

"Which they do not, I suppose — the daughters."

"They are almost too young, and the mother has such bad health. But I have not told you her history yet, or how they

came to be such a strange mixture of names and nationalities."

"Tell me: do."

"Mrs. Vanari was, I fancy, born and certainly brought-up in Madeira, with a consumptive or supposed consumptive aunt, for I believe the old woman is alive to this day. Benvenuto, who was on his way from America—he being quite as much a Yankee as an Italian—happened to touch at Madeira on his way to the East, whither he was bound in order to make a second fortune, having lost a first, and ran away with the niece, then a lovely girl—I can easily believe it—of three-and-twenty. This did not make him alter his plans. He went to India, to China, Leonilda being born in the first, and Regina—that's the name of the other daughter—in the second. The younger one was about three years old, when he died and left his widow the beginnings of a large fortune which he had already got together, for I believe, he was a desperately clever fellow."

"As one would expect of a cross between an Italian and an American."

"Just so. She came to Europe, and first took up her quarters in Naples. There she met Vanari. She was still—for I remember seeing her once, just a dozen years ago—a strikingly handsome woman, and immensely courted. Vanari, however, without a carlino, walked off with the prize. Shortly after their marriage they went—taking the children with them—to America, to look after some of her first husband's property. There they remained till about six years ago, when they returned to Italy; and they have lived in Florence ever since."

"Singular; but it accounts for the peculiarities, picked-up everywhere, with which —Leonilda, is her name?—interlarded her funny, frank, flowing talk. Is the mother nice?"

"Very, and exceedingly interesting. She has still enough of her good looks remaining for you to guess that they must once have been very considerable. She is a capital talker; talks a little too much, perhaps. But all women do, who talk well. She is almost an invalid, and gets low in an impulsive sort of way, and won't see any-

thing but the dark side of the shield, whatever you do to make her look at the other. Only come to Mrs. Fancep's to-night, and you will see them all."

"But, Pomeroy, you know I have not come to Florence to go out, and I dislike it so."

"But this is quite different. There will be only the usual Sunday set there; nobody dressed, and everybody pleasant. *I* always go; and she said last night, did she not, that she would be glad to see you?"

"Yes, she was very polite. But all your foreign Florentines are so kind and hospitable."

"You must treat us accordingly."

"Well, I will see about it." They were over the Ponte Carraia, and were on the Lung' Arno Corsini. "We part here."

"O no, we don't. Come home and dine with me—pot luck, you know—and a cigar afterwards; *that*, I can promise, shall be good."

"A rarity here."

"Come along, then. I shall have got hold of you, and can carry you off to

Mrs. Fancep's without your giving me the slip."

"If I must, I must."

And they passed on through the Piazza Santa Maria Novella, down the Via Nazionale, and so on till they reached Mr. Pomeroy's villino on the limits of the city.

"The best fellow in the world" may mean everything or nothing. Applied, as Delafosse would have applied it to Mr. Pomeroy, it meaned the former, and the application was literally just. He was a man who flattered nobody, yet whom everybody loved, who always said precisely what he thought, without the least varnish, and yet whom nobody dreaded. He was nature itself, but the most complete of gentlemen. He treated you, when he had known you for years, with the same courteous consideration as on the day when he had made your acquaintance, and yet he had never once been ceremonious. He was cram full of information and good sense, but was not more anxious to impart it than he was ready to acquire more. He went as straight as an arrow, and yet he never struck anybody.

What was his secret? I do not know; I only wish I did. There was not a sham bit about the man anywhere, either inside or outside, and he is the only one I ever met upon whose tombstone, should he come to die—which Heaven long forfend!—could honestly be written: "*Integer vitæ scelerisque purus.*"

They had smoked their cigars, fully deserving the character which the host had quietly insinuated of them, in an open loggia dotted with antique fragments of art and looking upon a leafy garden, through whose foliage glimpses of marble pedestals and statues could be caught, and then they started for Mrs. Fancep's, which lay the other side of the Arno, just over the Ponte Alle Grazie. Mr. Pomeroy said they were rather late.

As they entered the room, a chamber on whose walls were modern frescoes that connected certain great authors with their works by pictorial representations drawn therefrom, a chorus of female voices broke forth:

"O, here is Mr. Pomeroy: here is Mr.

Pomeroy!" And half a dozen young girls jumped rather than rose from their seats, and were evidently about to cluster round him, when they saw the tall stranger come through the doorway after him. They restrained their impulses a moment, and were again on their quiet behaviour, whilst greetings passed between Sir Everard and Mrs. Fancep.

"I am delighted to see you, Sir Everard, though I suspect I must thank Mr. Pomeroy for bringing you."

"Like Hesperus, he 'bringeth all good things,'" said Mr. Pomeroy, with his cheery manner; at which the young ladies saw that they were free to gather round him and divide him among them.

But though they had got him amongst them, they were much less noisy than usual; and while Sir Everard was being introduced to one or two of the elders, they were all talking in whispers at the other side of the room.

"Who is Sir Everard Delafosse?" they all wanted to know.

Mr. Pomeroy teased and amused them by

telling them all sorts of fables and hyperbolical stories about the young baronet, entering with his human heart and soul into a regular conversational romp with them. At length he contrived to get away from them to go and pay his respects to their parents, and the hostess said to Delafosse:

"Now, Sir Everard, we will release you, and let you go and talk with the young ladies; I have no doubt they are dying to see what you are like. You do not care to be introduced? Make each of them tell you all about the others."

There was such a simple, domestic, cheery, social atmosphere in the room, where there were also at least half a dozen pretty faces, that he could not help feeling, for the moment, both happy and interested. This freedom of manner, united to the most perfect propriety in its genuine sense, could not fail to please one who had been pleading for it in vain all his life. Here it was, however, in reality. The young ladies made way for him amongst them, with looks of honest welcome, and with a total absence of that

affectation of indifference which girls are usually brought up to regard as the perfection of mingled modesty and good-breeding. As if either could be based upon falsehood, or, if they could, as if they would then be good things, instead of necessarily just the very worst things possible.

One of them he recognised as his partner of the preceding evening, when he had been taken by Mr. Pomeroy, after the pieces were over, into the theatre, been introduced to Mrs. Fancep, and been made to join in the two or three dances on the stage when the audience had gone. He offered her his hand, which she took, though she evidently did not seem to expect it, called her Miss Benvenuto, and sat next to her. Then might have been seen how unable is youth, with the very best intentions, to compete with age in certain social struggles. Mr. Pomeroy had not been monopolised by any one of the young ladies, but had belonged to them all. Sir Everard would have been but too glad to follow the example; yet, somehow, he soon found himself talking more and more to one, and less and less to

the rest, till at last these had broken up into twos or threes, and he was sitting alone with the girl to whom he had offered his hand. Time, for the public good, certainly has compulsory powers, but he invariably gives, or at least offers, ample compensation.

"Is your sister here to-night?"

"No; she has not been well all day, and could not come. Do you like her?"

He smiled at the simple question.

"But I do not know her," he said.

"Not know her!" And she laughed. "Why, she came home last night and told us all about you—how you were so clever, and how she had danced twice with you—ever so much more."

"But that was *you*," he said.

How merrily she laughed!

"No; that was Leonilda."

"But you are Leonilda?"

"No, no, no; I am called Regina."

"Then I never saw you before to-night."

"Certainly not," she said.

"What a mistake I have made! I thought we were old friends, and that was why I

offered you my hand. Did you not think it strange?"

"I did, a little, particularly as you gave it to none of the rest."

"I certainly thought you were my charming partner of last night."

"Is she not charming? Oh, she is so dear! And isn't she pretty?"

"Very pretty indeed."

"Very much prettier than I am. Of course I know I am not pretty at all. I am so flattered at your mistaking me for Hilda, but I dont know how you could do it. She will not be flattered, I should think."

"Did you ever see anything like that child of mine, Mr. Pomeroy? She is talking to your friend as though he was as young and foolish as herself. What can she find to say to a man so thoughtful as you represent him to be, and as I should think he is?"

"*He* will take care of that. What do you think of him?"

"He is delightful. We have had a long talk."

"A good argument, therefore."

"Yes, three or four arguments, and we

differed on almost every point. He is much worse than you, for you sympathise, and he does not ; but he agrees with you in thinking we ought all to be happy, though I should very much question if he is. I suppose I may ask him to come and see us?"

"Of course ; and, to judge by the way he and Regina are getting on, I think he is sure to do so."

"He is an honourable man?"

"Strictly."

"A flirt?"

"Not intentionally ; but I think he does not marry, and it is perhaps as well you should know that."

"Do you know," Sir Everard was saying, "though I did make the mistake, and though you still seem to me to be so like your sister, I thought you were rather different from last night."

"How? Not so pretty, for one thing."

"No, it was not that. But you are not so simple, so young——"

"I am younger."

"Yes, I know that."

"How do you know it?"

"Mr. Pomeroy told me, this afternoon."

"And you think I am not so simple as Hilda. Everybody likes her best."

"I did not say so. You are more staid than she is. Do you study much?"

"Not at present. Mamma cannot afford it. I have only music and drawing lessons, and those rather from a friend than a mistress. Oh, you should see her! She is so, so beautiful—much prettier than Hilda. And she is so patient, and teaches me so well. Now we are going to have supper, and then we shall dance, but not till after twelve. We always come here on Sunday evenings. You will come again, won't you?"

"Very likely," he said, smiling, but charmed with her frankness.

"Oh yes, do; it is always so nice at cousin Mildred's."

"Who is cousin Mildred?"

"Mrs. Fancep. Did you not know?"

"Not that she was your cousin."

"But she isn't. We only call her that because she is so kind to us, and we love her."

A simple but excellent supper was eaten by them where they sat, and the chairs and ottoman were wheeled out of the way, and Delafosse had to do as the rest, and dance to the music of a piano played in turn by the girls. Besides Mr. Pomeroy and himself there was only another Englishman in the room, and he, brave boy, noble scion of a noble house, now lies lost among the snow of the Matterhorn. The rest were, as one meets them in Florence, from anywhere or nowhere.

About half-past one the gathering broke up, and Regina Benvenuto chattered to Delafosse, on his arm, all the way home, whilst her mother walked behind with Mr. Pomeroy.

"We shall be very glad to see you, Sir Everard," said Mrs. Vanari, "whenever you feel inclined to have a talk with my quiet and perhaps very stupid people."

"Yes, *do* come and see us," said Regina, plainly.

"Of course I will. Thanks, Mrs. Vanari; I will certainly do myself that pleasure, since you assure me that you are quiet, and I

must be allowed to disbelieve your other doubtfully-expressed assurance that you are stupid."

"What do you think of them?" asked Mr. Pomeroy, as he and Delafosse walked away together.

"Very, very charming. They are two dear little girls. I mistook one for the other to-night."

"I thought you did when you shook hands with her. You might easily do that, though they are very different when seen together."

"Who was that with the elder one yesterday evening—a young fellow with——"

"Destrier?"

"I think that was his name."

"A young artist, Leonilda's lover."

"But she is a child, a baby almost."

"Love will make her older, then. He would not be said nay, though I verily believe she had no idea of what he meant by all his fervent words. Regina says he threatened to drown himself in the Arno if her sister did not accept him."

"Upon my word, I come to Florence, the

reputed most naughty and artificial city in the world, and I find virtue and a state of nature."

"Just among the few I have shown you. There is not much elsewhere."

"Then I will stick to them, for they charm me."

"I thought they would." And by the Ponte Vecchio they parted.

When Delafosse reached his apartments he found on his table a little green-coloured note, inside which was the following, in the most elegant of French and the most flowing of hands :

"So false are all about us, that we poor women are allowed to guess at the cruel ravages of time only by the return of friends who, when they left us, found us worth more than a call, and now do not find us worth even a card.' And yet, Sir Everard, this is just a little brutal; confess it—is it not? You have been in Florence, I know, more than a fortnight, and I flatter myself that you can no more have escaped being acquainted with the fact that I am in it than

that the Tower of the Palazzo Vecchio is. But I will wager that you have looked at that great tall thing often enough (perhaps because it is so far—ah! you men!) and have never been at my house, or my box, or my carriage door (perhaps because you were once so near).

"Still, if it be only for courtesy's sake, give me the satisfaction of seeing you. I heard of your arrival, and at once I boasted —as who would not?—of knowing you. A fortnight passes and you never come near, and the world must begin to think I am lying, and do not know you at all.

"But think of this. Being unable to endure the imputation any longer, I declared to-day that I had seen you—Heaven forgive me!—and that you were coming to my Monday reception.

"To-morrow that will be. You will come then, if only to save my word. I believe I am not what I used to be; but I assure you I am not very ugly yet, and I have not forgotten.

"ANASTASIE, MARQUISE DE BONNEFOI."

He read the letter, and put it down with a smile.

"Pomeroy is right. They are not all in a state of nature at Florence. Certainly nothing would reduce the wonderful Anastasie to it. Indeed I should think, from her note, that she is a touch more artificial than when I foiled her artifices, six years ago. I suppose I shall have to go and see her; call only, though—I will do nothing more. None of her or anybody else's receptions for me!"

CHAPTER III.

A DETERMINED WOMAN.

That Florence, despite her dangerous modern honours, will still remain what she has been for now six hundred years, the pre-eminently beautiful city of the world, I have no sort of doubt. But that a good many of her other characteristics may be elbowed out by the second-hand Parisian elegances—bad enough at first hand—now being introduced by the flitters from the deserted subalpine capital, there is good reason to fear.

But what a wonderful mixture she has hitherto been! Her social state was accu-

rately represented by her outward appearance—a sort of microcosm — a gathering within her narrow limits of specimens of nearly all the people and things one sees elsewhere. Opulence and poverty, superstition and indifferentism, insolent vice and shrinking virtue; all tongues, all races, all purses, all pursuits, all manners—except bad ones—are or were congregated and at peace within the curving walls. Whom would you know? Retired ambassadors? They abound. Blacklegs? There is one standing over the way. Are you fond of princes? I will take you to a couple to-night. Have you a partiality for exiled patriots, very eloquent and very poor? You shall not sleep before you see a roomful. If you have a weakness for artists, sometimes vain and dirty, sometimes neither, you can have your choice of five hundred. Supposing that travel and a tolerant disposition have given you a preference for very pretty girls who talk at you by the hour and yet want nothing from you, do not the fair daughters of the great reunited republic meet you at every turn? You shall be learned, idle,

wicked, devout, dilettante, do-nothing, what-you-will, and always in good company. She is very clever, is Florence, and has hitherto accepted every innovation without allowing her own historic peculiarities to be obliterated. Will she so manage the new invasion as not to be overwhelmed, and not become a place where everybody and everything, however much they may occasionally differ from themselves, never for a moment differ from everybody and everything else? Let us all yet hope so, and those be grateful who knew her whilst she still was the large-minded home of infinite dissimilarities.

Delafosse had known Florence long, knew it well, and still liked it vastly, though he now wanted from it but very little of what he had once regarded as its principal charm. He was in search of none out of the large catalogue of social curiosities written above. Indeed he scarce knew what he wanted from it, except a halting-place and something like a moment's peace. Into whatever mystical sort of state he might have been forced by long daily dwelling among ruins

centuries old, and however much Rome might have crushed or bewildered him into dreaming rather than thinking that Lily ought to be hiding behind this column, leaning against that archway, or sketching from that other bit of broken wall, he could not imagine for a moment that he was likely to find her here. Florence provoked, indeed permitted, no such delusions. He was not likely to meet any ghosts by the lively Arno, or any dead come to life on her sunny bridges. There was nothing weird or mysterious about her. She could give him Verdi's music, good ices, any amount of ballet-dancing, flowers, happy salutations, beautiful pictures — anything but the solution of painful personal problems, with which really she could have nothing to do.

It is possible that, had it not been for the two young girls to whom Mr. Pomeroy had introduced him, he would by this, almost the end of April, have left Florence, and wandered over the Apennines in an easterly direction, and have been groping about Rimini or Ravenna, or some other not yet resuscitated city by the same sea. But he

was necessarily in that frame of mind when very slight circumstances would favour his movements ; and it is not too much to say that the society, to be had whenever he liked to have it, of these two semi-children, was sufficient inducement to keep him still lingering in the fair Tuscan city.

He went to see them every day, and sometimes twice in the same day. They had a delightful little "apartment," the sitting-room of which so captivated him that he always used to tell them that if he were the "padrone," their landlord, he would turn them out remorselessly and live in it himself. Itself admirable in size, in shape, in ornament, it had a little oaken balcony over which hung an acacia whose coming blossoms you could already almost smell, and under and about which clambered roses just breaking their hulls. Below was a garden dexterously laid out so as to give an idea of size which, considering that the grounds were intramural, was in reality considerable. The house looked upon the west, and even there, was protected by the tall trees of the Torrigiani gardens; so that it was safe from the

heat which day by day now began to make itself more felt.

He was always welcome, and was invariably received, even when he had been there five or six hours previously, as though he had been absent for months. Their joy was so genuine and so sweet, so different from anything else he had ever known, that he sometimes went from the sheer pleasure of witnessing it.

Signor Vanari was rarely there, and never for more than ten minutes together. A true Italian, he spent none of his life at home; it was passed in cafés, the Cascine, and the theatre. This, be it understood, implied no conjugal indifference or neglect. He was as fond of his wife as a man can be in the presence of such social habits, was solicitous about her health, and personally attentive to her when present. He thought her daughters very good children, but did not take much notice of them, and was never seen with them abroad. He seemed glad that they should have got hold of somebody so kind and agreeable as their English friend, for whom he had always pleasant Tuscan greet-

ings and gossip when they met; but this, considering the number of times Sir Everard crossed his threshold, was seldom.

But what, it may be wondered, could he say to or do with these simple young people when he was with them, as he was so constantly? Childlike in many things they might be; but they were not children altogether, and so he could not play with them, romp, toss them in his arms, take them on his knee, show them his watch or picture-books, or do anything of that sort. Perfectly true. But he could listen to their prattle, and prattle back again; sometimes talk more seriously to them and give them some of that information which, truth to tell, they sorely wanted. And then there was always the mother, a bright, clever, intelligent, witty woman, who, all the more because she was mostly tied to the house by indifferent health, relished and cultivated the one pleasure that was left her, conversation. And if you cannot readily understand that he was just the kind of man to whom a mother and daughters so circumstanced would very shortly become attached, I have painted Sir

Everard Delafosse very badly. As for him, the pleasure and comfort which he kept on more and more finding in their society, was due partly to its real charm, but also in great measure, it must be owned, to the same reason why he had found such comfort and pleasure in his rides with Rosie Raffles. They diverted without exciting him, they won him from his trouble without making him feel at all ashamed that he should be won from it, and in this they were better even than the young horsewoman, whose comfort had been, he now thought, as questionable as her way of producing it.

And further, is it not pleasant to have a house which you can enter whenever you like, even when the inmates are not there, take off your hat and ensconce yourself in any easy chair, put up your feet, have a rest, saunter into the garden, smoke a cigarette, hear pretty laughter, be rather petted and thought a good deal of, and never be crossed or contradicted, but esteemed far above any such retaliation for your real or supposed superiority?

Such was Sir Everard's position. And it

was surely better than going about alone and asking of the stars or solitude, where is Lily? Withal, in his heart of hearts deep down, he had not given up wondering the same sad unsatisfied wonder.

"You have not shown me your water-colours, Regina," he said, one day. He had already come to call both her and Leonilda by their christian names.

"Here they are. But they are so bad. The only good thing about them is the tips of the trees, and those are done by Miss Williams."

"Is that the name of your drawing mistress, of whom you spoke to me."

"Yes; and who teaches me singing too?"

"Ah! you should see *her*, Sir Everard! said Mrs. Vanari. "You who think so much of female beauty, would admire her immensely."

"I am sure you would," said Regina. "And she is such a dear, in every way. Oh, I love her so much."

"But these are exceedingly well done, Regina."

"I am so glad you think so."

"But they are only copies; they are not from nature. Why do you not paint from nature? You have no excuse in Florence for not doing so, outline and colour being so abundant."

"That is what Miss Williams says. But how do you know that they are copies?"

He laughed.

"That is clear enough, Regina, on the face of them. But even if it were not, I know my own country when I see it, and the originals of these must have been taken from English landscapes."

She clapped her hands and laughed in turn.

"You are wrong. Mamma! mamma! Sir Everard is wrong."

They were so much in the habit of accepting as gospel all that he said, that for him to make a mistake seemed to Regina the most wonderful and yet delightful thing in the world. And she was, of course, all the more pleased to catch him tripping immediately after he had found that her handiworks were only copies.

"No—no—no; you are quite wrong.

Miss Williams did these out of her own head, since she came to Italy."

"From memory, you mean?"

"From imagination," said Mrs. Vanari.

"After all, Regina, it is much the same thing. She only painted here what she once saw there; and she has done it very accurately."

Indeed the landscapes were thorough English woodlands, and reminded him strongly of those round Batterton on which he had so often ridden with Rosie Raffles.

"No; you were wrong, and I shall tell Hilda, everybody. It is so pleasant to think that you can be wrong sometimes."

"You will be able to think so very often, when you know me longer."

"But I should not like you to be wrong often; only now and then, to console me for my poor little stupid blunders. Are these not pretty? I *would* copy them, I like them so much, though Miss Williams always wants me to stick to drawing, and to copying from nature—nasty old chairs and baskets and things."

"But you should do what your mistress tells you."

"But she is not my mistress; she is my friend."

"Why may she not be both?"

"She might, but——"

"Regina means that Miss Williams teaches her from affection, not for money. Indeed, I could not at present afford to pay for lessons. Regina is tremendously proud of her friendship with Miss Williams."

"Of course I am. She is so pretty and so nice, and so fond of me."

"Quite right, my dear. Tell Sir Everard how you made her acquaintance."

"O it is very simple. I saw her making a little copy at the Belle Arti one day, and stopped to look at it. She looked up at me, and our eyes met, and she spoke to me. O, you don't know how sweetly! And I love her so much, and we became friends immediately, and she offered to help me with my drawing if I cared. And of course I cared. And now she helps me with my singing, too."

"She is very fond of Regina, and thinks her——"

"No, mamma, never mind that. But we are great friends, so that she is not my mistress; that is all."

Of course, Regina Benvenuto had not been silent to her "friend, not mistress" about the addition to her life and that of her mamma and sister by the intimacy with Sir Everard Delafosse, and had spoken about him almost as enthusiastically to Miss Williams as she had spoken of Miss Williams to him. She was a little disappointed to find that her friend did not regard him as quite such a valuable addition as she did.

"Is he married?" was her friend's first and immediate question.

"No; and Mr. Pomeroy told mamma that he was not a marrying man. Why do you look so serious?"

"Do I, Regina dear?" There was a pause of a few seconds. "Does he come to see you often?"

"Every day, sometimes twice a day, and we are always so delighted to see him. O, he is so kind, and so clever, and so hand-

some, and so gentlemanly, and so everything."

"Is he going to stay long in Florence?"

"He says not, and that he may leave any day. But he stays and stays, and I hope he will stay for ever so long yet. I don't know what we should do, if he went away."

The other looked serious indeed, but said no more at the time. Regina repeated most of this conversation with charming frankness, the very next time that she saw Sir Everard, and took particular pains to mention, with merry laughter, her friend's question if Delafosse were a married man.

"I told her that you were very kind, and nice, and that sort of thing, and she wanted to know if you were married. I am sure she would not ask such a question if she were to see you; would she, mamma? Sir Everard is not the least like a married man, is he? Do come to see her, some day, and we can ask her here, can we not."

"By all means, my dear, if you wish it," said her mother.

"Would you not like to meet her, Sir Everard?"

"You know I do not care about meeting anybody. We are very happy together in this dear little house, and I am not in want of anybody else."

It was natural enough that Regina should be pleased to hear him say that he was so well contented with them that he craved for no further society. Still she would have liked to have shown him to her female friend, and her friend to him, being exceedingly proud of both; and she was determined that she would do so before long, in spite of his indifference.

In reality, however, his answer was not quite so indifferent as to her it had appeared. He already knew from Regina that Miss Williams was English, and that she was very much interested in her pupil. And the fact, just mentioned, that she had asked if he was married, led him at once to surmise that she was one of those countrywomen of his, exorbitantly plentiful, who are such staunch supporters of conventional morality, and so quick to be down upon any social state of things that to them seem likely to permit of any inroad upon it. No doubt

Regina had told her of his constant visits, and had extolled him to the skies with her usual ingenuous simplicity. Whereupon Miss Williams had inquired if he was a married man, had learned that he was not, and at the same time would certainly hear nothing from Regina of a kind to induce the belief that he wanted to marry *her*. Hence his pious country-woman's conclusion would be that the relationship between him and her dear sweet pupil was all wrong, very perilous if not very improper, and must be interfered with if possible. These were his immediate surmises, and they were not very far from the truth. Such as they were, they caused him to think of Miss Williams with no favourable thoughts, and to be anything but anxious that she should come and see for herself the footing upon which he was with Regina and her sister. That it was not only innocent and innocuous but exceedingly and rarely beautiful, Heaven knows, and he knew. But it would not be so regarded by the ordinary eye of his outwardly correct middle-class countrywomen, to whom no doubt this Miss Williams belonged. She would be sure to

consider him as a very dangerous person, and would do her best to spoil if not destroy a position which was now his own chief comfort, and had for him an inexpressible charm. This was why he had given Regina the almost discouraging answer to her inquiry if he would not like to meet Miss Williams some day in their apartment.

But though quick to suspect the motive which had prompted the question if he were married, and quite prepared any day to hear that the enemy had broken ground against him, he was firmly resolved to hold his own for the present. He went to Mrs. Vanari's just as much as ever, and indeed that pleasant little house and Mr. Pomeroy's were the only ones in all much-visiting Florence that he could be strictly said to visit. What he should do with regard to the importunate Marquise de Bonnefoi, he had resolved, or thought he had resolved, immediately on reading her note. Indeed his resolution was expressed aloud, and we overheard it.

She was already wife and marchioness when Sir Everard had met her first at

Vienna, when he was three-and-twenty, and she professed to be but twenty-six. A Russian by birth, she had married a French nobleman of doubtful nobility, but very considerable means. He very soon found that he could live quite as comfortably without her as with her, and that she had not the slightest objection to his doing so, provided that he did not leave her without a good establishment, and an income sufficient to maintain it. Every now and then he turned up, just to remind people that there was such a person. On other occasions she never took the trouble to account for his absence, regarding it apparently as the most natural thing in the world.

Were I to say that the Marquise de Bonnefoi was not and is not very lovely, I should at once raise up against me a chorus of dissentient and astonished voices, who would want to know where were my eyes, or at any rate where was my taste. Nevertheless, does golden hair, no matter though it be genuine, or how much there may be of it, a delicate complexion, or small features, of necessity make a woman beau-

tiful? I think not, though they go a long way. But they would have to go a much longer way to counterbalance those grey eyes, in every glance of which there was a lie and an attempted treachery; or those passionless lips, in every line of which there was latent savageness that was not even lust. Unquestionably she had an exquisite and facile figure; the movements of a lithe willow-branch were never more delicately modulated by the west wind than were her motions in gracious deference to your wishes. Her every attitude was perfect, her repose a picture.

It would be ridiculous to say that she had entertained a passion, or even a caprice, for Delafosse when she first met him at Vienna. Her life was too much of a social campaign for her ever to have a caprice; and she had never given the slightest signs of passion for anything except preserved melons. She had as much passion for her worshippers as a marble altar has for its devotees; but if they passed without kneeling, she had, like the altar, vindictive lightning in store for their presumptuous neglect. Sir Everard

Delafosse, out of courtesy, had, perhaps, genuflected, just bent one knee in passing, and that was all. From the unimportant it might possibly have been accepted as sufficient; but she was determined to have more from him.

She tried hard. He was young, he was good natured, but, unfortunately for her, he was not a fool, and had eyes quick enough to know when a woman really loved him. At last, one evening, on the staircase of a crowded reception, she suddenly turned to him, and said: "Sir Everard! I claim your protection against this gentleman."

She spoke of an Austrian officer, covered with stars and honours, and old enough almost to be his grandfather. He stood amazed. Before he could speak, the Austrian was at his side.

"Madame la Marquise, *I* must protect this young gentleman against *you*. Nobody doubts the courage of an Englishman, and probably nobody but you, madame, would ask for its display without any cause. The Marquis de Bonnefoi is a reputed swordsman, and he is your proper protector."

And he passed his arm through Sir Everard's and walked away. And the two men soon satisfied each other, one that she had been guilty of an infamous ruse, and the other why she had done so.

Delafosse had never seen her since, but he could not have failed to hear of her often. She had been one of the most determined "Entertainers" in Europe. There did not exist a royal house some of whose members, and in many cases the highest, had not honoured la Marquise by their presence; but there was, probably, not a bourgeois of the thousands who had also entered her salons that did not thoroughly despise her.

She was now and had for some little time been entertaining in Florence. How she contrived to render herself intolerable in the most tolerant city in the world, it would take long to tell, and may be easily guessed by those conversant with such matters. Everybody, or nearly everybody, in Florence attended her receptions, because she made them do so, just as we have seen

her attempting to make Delafosse. There was no lie too big for her to tell, no humiliation too small for her to face, if they would bring under her roof those whom she wanted to see there.

Sir Everard, on receiving her note, contented himself with sending his card and a polite reply, promising that if he attended any receptions in Florence, he would attend hers, but that there was not the slightest chance of his doing so, as he did not any longer go into society, of which, nevertheless, he had no doubt she was as brilliant an ornament as when they had encountered each other in it, some six years ago. She wrote him another note, expressing not so much her own as society's regret at his determination, and hoping to see his resolve a little shaken before long. It required no answer, and he did not answer it. But, about ten days later, he took Mrs. Vanari and her daughter, accompanied by Leonilda's lover, to the Pergola, and was soon espied by la Marquise, who was enthroned in her box, and sent one of her attendants with a

pressing written message to the effect that she hoped Sir Everard would honour her, if it were but for a moment.

There was no help for it, and he went. She covered him with smiling and complimentary reproaches, and so spoke, and looked, and conducted herself towards him, as forcibly to expel from her box every man in it who had the decency to take a hint. When he rose to return to his friends,

"But you would leave me alone!" she said. "You are and always were the most independent of mankind; still you cannot quite do that. You would not slight and depreciate me in the face of the whole theatre. There, sit down, stay with me, and let me be happy for a quarter of an hour."

"The ladies in the box from which I came are my guests; that is my difficulty, you see."

"Which box?" she said.

"The one in which you saw me."

"Which is it?" she asked, innocently.

She was such a habitual liar, and lied so entirely with an object, that the moment

she had obtained her end, she positively often overlooked and forgot the means by which she had reached it. As a matter of course she knew which was his box, for had she not found it out, written him a note, and sent a servant with it, addressed to the very number? But now that he was in hers, she chose to ignore the fact that he had been in another and that she had sent for him.

"Which is it?"

"Number nineteen: and the ladies are my guests."

"I saw no ladies."

She now by implication confessed to one lie by telling another; but this second one had also its object.

"Number nineteen." And she took up the lorgnette. "But they have a man with them, or a boy of some sort."

With all her craft, she could not resist being occasionally impertinent; and this contributed largely, in all probability, to the dislike with which many people who knew little of her regarded her.

"A young artist," Sir Everard said, quietly, "of excellent promise."

"Are they artists too?"

"Who?"

"The women."

"No. One of the young ladies is engaged to him."

"And the other?"

"Is her sister."

"I thought, Sir Everard, you never went into society now; but certainly I never saw *them* there."

"They are too young."

"What is their name?"

"Benvenuto. Their mother's present name is Vanari."

"Vanari, Vanari?" And she pretended to think, put up her glasses again, and went on speaking meanwhile. "I remember. He wanted to come to my reception, but I really knew nothing about him, and therefore did not ask him. They are rather pretty, the daughters."

"Yes, and very charming in their way."

"They are not very distinguished looking, Sir Everard."

"According to the conventional standard, they are not."

Though none of her swains had retired, he again rose to go. She had got hold of him, and had driven everybody else out of the box, and all the theatre could see them there, and would conclude that she had made another slave. She felt sure that he could not leave her under the circumstances, so she could afford to revenge herself on him by a few faint impertinences, all the time that other people would conclude that he was covering her with compliments. But he knew her too well to be outmatched by her, with his eyes open.

"I really must go, Marquise. What will my friends think of me?"

"What will my friends think of *me*, if you do go?"

But he left her for all that, she then resuming all her gracious smiles and compliments as he did so, even in that, the very moment of her mortification. It was only in the hours of her triumph that she was insolent. She must have been mortified enough now; for she was absolutely alone

for five minutes, at the end of which time a couple of the exiled returned. She had lost ground by this last attempt; but that did not at all deter her from resolving to make another and a bolder.

Four days later, as he was crossing the Piazza Manin about half-past six in the afternoon, a carriage driving more rapidly than the rest, but evidently bound like them for the Cascine, dashed past him. It contained the Marquise de Bonnefoi. He raised his hat; but, to his amaze, as he did so, he perceived, seated by her side and also returning his move—Regina Benvenuto!

CHAPTER IV.

INJURIOUS SUSPICIONS.

About an hour and a half later, Delafosse passed through the quiet court-yard which led to the stone staircase, atop of which, on the first floor, was Mrs. Vanari's apartment. He found her at home, and anything but well.

"I am quite alone, you see. My husband, of course, is in the Cascine, and Hilda has gone out for a walk with Harry Destrier, and Regina, who ought to have been home more than an hour ago, has not come. I am beginning to be uneasy about her."

He was going to tell her what he had seen, when in rushed Regina herself, out of breath but radiant with joy.

"Wherever have you been, my dear child?"

"I will tell you in a moment. How are you, Sir Everard? O, I was so glad you saw me! Poor mamma! Have you been left alone long?"

"Yes, Hilda and Harry went out just at the time that we expected you would return, and Sir Everard has only just come."

He was looking exceedingly stern. She could not fail to notice it, and said at once,

"How serious you look! indeed, cross! What is the matter?"

"Tell your story. Let us hear that first."

"Well, you know, mamma dear," and she stooped down and kissed her, "I am so sorry you have been alone so long. You know I had just finished my lesson when there was a knock at Miss Williams's door, and in came—O, so grand!—the lady that Sir Everard went to speak to, the other evening when he took us to the Pergola and we enjoyed ourselves so much. You remember, Sir Everard."

"Perfectly," he answered, still looking

most unusually and unpleasantly stern at poor Regina; "the Marquise de Bonnefoi, with whom, and in whose carriage I saw you this evening."

"You with the Marquise de Bonnefoi!" exclaimed the astonished mother. "Why, how came that about?"

"I am going to tell you. She came in to Miss Williams's, just as I was putting on my gloves, and the servant was getting ready to come with me, as we agreed she should to-day. She said she had heard of Miss Williams's water-colours from a Marchesa Fidelmonte, and how beautiful they were, and she should like to see them if she might, and buy one or two. Miss Williams did not seem to have heard of the Marchesa."

"Of course not," growled Delafosse; "one of her impudent lies."

"Was it?" asked Regina. "Why do you think so?"

"Never mind. Let us hear the rest."

"Miss Williams said she did not know the Marchesa."

"Probably such a person does not exist," he growled again.

"But, of course, she said she should be glad to show the Marquise de Bonnefoi her water-colours. She admired them immensely, and bought one of them—a little one—Miss Williams asking only eight lire (*I* should have asked eighty), and altogether was so polite, and elegant, and nice. I think we both fell in love with her."

"But come to your drive, Regina; tell us about that."

"She saw that I was dressed and going out, and she asked me which was my direction. I told her, and she said she should pass by the door and would take me in her carriage. How could I refuse? She was so kind, and it would save the servant's coming with me, and Miss Williams said I might go."

"Come home, that is."

"Yes, but when we got to the Arno, she said she was going to the usual drive in the Cascine, and she would be very glad to take me. I said I thought I had better come and ask you, but she said that she would call on you and explain it when she brought me home."

"Is she coming up, and where is she?" said Mrs. Vanari, in a flutter, as she had sent the hairdresser away that afternoon without receiving his benefits, in consequence of her feeling so much out of sorts. Regina laughed.

"No, mamma. She has gone away, saying she would call some other time when she took me out again, which she has promised to do, if you will let me go; but, to-day, when she found it was so much later than she thought, she was obliged to drive home at once. I enjoyed it immensely. The only thing was, I was so badly dressed, and everybody else was so beautifully dressed, la Marquise especially, that I felt quite ashamed. But she said I looked very well, and that young figures required no ornament. May I go with her again, mamma?"

The contrast between the expression on her mother's face and that of Sir Everard could not well have been greater. Mrs. Vanari knew as much about the Marquise de Bonnefoi as she knew about most of the fine ladies in Florence who received largely. She heard them all besmeared in turn, as

all who go there do hear the impartial detraction of the light-tongued city; but she had lived too long in Italy not to know that it might mean very much or very little. Delafosse, on returning from the marchioness's box, had not expressed any opinion of his own about her, partly because he did not particularly care to talk about her, and partly because the presence of the young girls made it impossible for him to say what he would have said had he said anything. So that the fact of Sir Everard's seeming to know her well, had rather raised her in the mother's silent estimation, as it had, of course, placed her beyond all attack in Regina's.

And so, had it not been for the severity of Sir Everard's expression, which could not escape her, the generous mother would have at once manifested the pleasure which she really felt, not so much at her child being noticed, as at the opportunity, so rarely offered, of Regina thoroughly enjoying herself. But his hard look puzzled her.

"You will let me go, mamma, will you not?" Regina repeated.

"I do not see why not, my dear. I am sure you very seldom have amusement of any kind."

"Never, mamma," said Regina, "except at cousin Mildred's, and that is very quiet."

"Signor Vanari never takes them anywhere, Sir Everard—during the day, I mean; and even if they were old enough, and we could afford it, I am not strong enough to take them out of an evening. It is very stupid for them. I don't know what we should have done without Harry Destrier, though Hilda was rather saucy to him at first. And if *you* were to go, as you may any day, we should be absolutely alone. Do you see any reason why she should not go for a drive with the Marquise?"

"Yes, Mrs. Vanari, since you ask me, every reason in the world." Regina turned round and stared. "Regina is not to blame, of course. But I do not regard the Marquise as fit society even for me. How, then, can I regard her as fit society for Regina? She is the most objectionable of women."

"How, then, do you happen to know

her?" asked Regina, colouring, and evidently made a little pettish by what he had said.

"I made her acquaintance many years ago, and should cease that acquaintance altogether if she would permit me. As it is, I only just know her."

"She talked as if she knew you very well, and spoke very differently of you from the way in which you speak of her; indeed, most kindly and complimentarily."

"That may be. I set no value upon her compliments, and you must set no value upon them. You know quite well that I would not, without very good reason, try to prevent you having any amusement. But I shall feel that you care neither for my opinion nor for me, if, supposing that I satisfy your mamma that you ought not to drive with the Marquise de Bonnefoi, you do not submit cheerfully to her decision."

"But I shall submit," she said, and left the room to take off her things.

Delafosse at once spoke out plainly enough to Mrs. Vanari; and Regina perceived, the

moment she re-entered the room, that the question was settled against her.

"Then I am not to go any more, mamma?"

"No, my dear. I quite agree with Sir Everard. The Marquise de Bonnefoi is not such a companion as I could accept for such good children as I am glad to say mine are."

"It is a pity, then, I went with her at all," she rejoined, still loth to lose the anticipated pleasure; "though I do not know what harm she has done or can do me. It will seem so strange to refuse her. What shall you say, mamma?"

"I am surprised," said Delafosse, "that Miss Williams should have allowed you to go. Since she is such a particular person, she ought to have known better, and been particular at the right moment, and about the right people."

Half of this speech was necessarily unintelligible to his hearers; but it shows the attitude of mind which he had assumed in defence against Miss Williams—an attitude

which he was only too glad to be able to strengthen by any opportunity of retaliatory reproach against her.

"She knows nothing of la Marquise; and even if she did, the only proposal that she heard was the one to bring me home. So it is not fair to blame her. It is all my own stupid, unfortunate fault, and I am always doing what I ought not to do, and I am very sorry. There!"

The outspoken contrition for a fault which was really none of hers, of course quite disarmed him, and they were all as bright as ever. But the following day Regina visited her friend, and related the scrape which she had got into by her thoughtless acceptance of what she had considered a kindness.

"And such it was," said her companion. "I do not see why you should not have gone with her. She seemed to me to be an exceedingly nice woman."

"But Sir Everard Delafosse says that she is not a proper person for me to know. You have no idea how angry he seemed."

"I think you are just as well with her as——"

"As what?"

"Nothing. I suppose he wants you all to himself, Regina."

"I am sure he does not. You do not know how good he is to us all, how kind, how constant in coming to see us. The house looks quite different when he comes in. Do you know, he was cross with you also, yesterday, for letting me go with the Marquise. But I stuck up for you, and said it was not your fault."

"I do not see why he should regulate your conduct."

"He does not regulate it."

"He has done so in this very instance."

"No. He gave mamma his opinion, and she agreed with him, and it is she who does not wish me to go any more. If you knew him, you would not be surprised. He is always right; he has had so much experience, and is so clever."

The other gazed sadly at her a moment, and then turned away.

"Have a walk with me to-day. Let us go and sketch in the Boboli gardens; I have my pass with me. It will be so delightful."

"I cannot, Regina. I must stop at home and work."

"You never go out with me now. I don't think you love me as much as you used to do."

"O yes, darling, I do." And she affectionately kissed Regina, who saw the tears rolling down her cheeks, and was, therefore, satisfied for the present upon that point. "But I never go out now, except in the very early morning, or very late in the evening; it is beginning to be so hot in the middle of the day. You must excuse me, dear; and you must not think I do not love you as much as ever. I love you more and more every day. You do not——" And she paused.

"I do not—what?"

"Nothing, nothing. I must send you away now, for I must work. Come the day after to-morrow, and we will have some music."

The apartment in which Regina's friend and mistress lived and worked, consisted of three little rooms, perched at the top of a big old palazzo, now let out in flats. Her

sitting-room was meanly furnished, but her own taste and care had given it, nevertheless, an air of pleasant comfort, and even of elegance. Drawings of her own, in simple frames, were on the walls, and flowers were judiciously placed on table and bracket. Lilies of the valley in pots outside the window made fragrant the room and ornamented the now open lattice. She went to it now and leaned out. Nearly the whole of Florence could be thence descried, and was now before her under the golden haze of sunset, which almost gave colour—the one thing it wanted—to her face.

"How can I speak to her?" she said. "She is so innocent, I don't think she would know what I mean. But I feel sure she is in danger; she is certain to end by loving him, if she does not love him already—which I half fear she does, though she is so young and simple that she does not know it. He wants to keep her from the Marquise, from everybody—from me even, perhaps—in order that she may feel the full weight of his strange influence. If he were

only married! And to give out that he does not want to marry! I must tell her; I must do something. To think that"—and the tears came rolling—rolling down her sad white cheeks. "To think that he—he—should be so—so wicked!"

And she burst into a paroxysm of weeping, her head dropping upon the window-sill, and her hair laid among the lilies.

CHAPTER V.

UNDERHAND WORK.

WHATEVER might be Regina's disappointment or Miss Williams's opinion of his motives, Delafosse was too well satisfied at having foiled la Marquise to trouble his head much about any other aspect of the question.

"Did you ever know such an audacious woman in your life?" he asked Mr. Pomeroy. "She moves heaven and earth to make me visit her; and failing in the direct attempt, she takes the trouble to lay a trap—for I would swear she planned the whole thing—to catch Regina in her toils, knowing that I should follow. You may depend upon it

that she first found out where the girl lived, then watched her to Miss Williams's, then found out who *she* was, invented the story of the Marchesa Fidelmonte——"

"There is certainly no such person in Florence."

"Of course not—or elsewhere. And so she carried out the scheme. But I have beaten her again."

"What is her object, do you think?"

"Pique only. I am not fool enough to imagine for a moment that she cares for me in the least. She is vexed with me because I have not paid and will not pay her court." And he told Mr. Pomeroy the Vienna story.

"That may be part of her motive, but it is not the whole of it. She has contrived to get herself more hated, more abused, and more talked of than any other woman in Florence. You are an Englishman, in whose favour there is something to say, and against whom there is nothing, and she wants to have you at her receptions in order that people may see that strangers do not regard her as Florentines do."

"I dare say there is something in that."

"I am sure of it. And, though I agree with you that she tried to make use of Regina Benvenuto partly in order to entangle you, you must remember that it is a magnificent thing for her to be seen driving a young, good, and innocent girl in her carriage. It is a sort of testimonial and tribute to her character."

"The ——" said Delafosse, using the only word applicable to her. "She will not do it again at any rate. By the way, do you know this Miss Williams? You know everybody in Florence."

"I suppose I do, almost. But I do not know *her*. I do not think she has been here long; and all that I know of her I know from Mrs. Vanari and Regina."

"As much as I know, in fact. Plague on her! I think she is inclined to make mischief. She asked Regina if I was married. Now, as she does not know me, and it cannot concern her personally whether I am married or not, she can have asked the question only on account of Regina. What else she may have said to her, I cannot tell;

for, frank as Regina is, she would not repeat to me any remarks Miss Williams may have made regarding me and Regina herself. But I strongly suspect she must have tried to put some nonsense into her head, to the effect that if I am not going to marry her, I ought to be. Now I am very happy with these nice people; but I have no more idea of such a thing than Regina herself would have, if left to herself."

"But I told them long ago that you were not at all a man likely to marry."

"Quite right: thanks. And you may tell them again; though I am quite sure they would not require telling if it were not for these wretched busy-bodies of English women who are always thrusting themselves and their conventional notions into more independent people's concerns."

"I should not mind, if I were you. Perhaps it is just as well that Regina should be put upon her guard by somebody."

"She does not require it. She is my dear little sister, and she knows it. However, I shall very probably be leaving Florence soon now. I have a letter from Mon-

tagu Narracott, of whom you have heard me speak——"

"Yes, and I have often heard of him."

"Well, he and his wife have already left England, and are on their way here. Whilst they remain in Florence, I shall; but that will not be long, and I shall then have to move about with them."

Though he was perfectly sincere in what he said, and therefore not likely to imagine any change in the behaviour of his friends which really had not taken place, he thought he saw a difference in the reception which they now gave him. In this he was right; but he was soon consoled to find that the change had nothing to do with his own conduct.

"We are all in great trouble," said Mrs. Vanari, "and have been for some days, though we did not like to bother you about it. My husband disapproves of Hilda's engagement, and wishes it to end. He says it is ridiculous; that she herself is very young, and that Destrier is not in a position to marry, and will not be for many years."

"But, *mamma mia*," said Leonilda, plain-

tively, "I do not want to marry him, for many, many years yet; indeed, I should be quite content never to marry him at all. But why should we cease to be engaged? Harry will stab himself, drown himself, do I don't know what, if our engagement were broken off. If you had seen him, Sir Everard, before I accepted him! I thought he would have gone mad. You'll speak to the Signor (the daughters always called Signor Vanari the Signor) for us, won't you?"

Was there ever such a simple Leonilda, he thought.

"Yes; of course I will speak to him. Destrier is both clever and persevering, and will get on, I am sure. He sold one of his pictures this morning."

"Did he?" said they all, with joy.

"Yes, and got a commission for another."

"How do you know?" asked Regina.

"I was present."

"Who bought the picture?" inquired the mother.

"Well—I did."

"How kind you are!" exclaimed Regina,

enthusiastically. "And who gave the commission?"

"The same person. But he will soon have better purchasers."

Then the two girls kissed their mother, and each other, and danced about their little room, and all sign of cloud had disappeared from their faces. It seemed to remain, however, on their mother's.

"Do you know," said Regina, the next time she went to have a singing lesson, "what Sir Everard Delafosse has done? He has bought one of Harry Destrier's pictures and given him an order for another. Is he not kind?"

"No doubt he wants them. I am sure they are worth buying."

"But nobody else has bought them, and he is not very rich, because Mr. Pomeroy said so. But he knew that Harry is awfully anxious to get on, on account of Hilda, and I am sure he has bought them for that reason. And indeed it was most fortunate; for the Signor has been so disagreeable, this last week or so, to all of us, and said he

should insist on what he called Hilda's ridiculous engagement being broken off. But now that Harry is getting on so well, he cannot say anything against it. What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing, dear."

But she was thinking of something, and her thoughts, had she chosen to speak them aloud, would have been expressed thus:

"There is only one person who goes to the house, beside himself, who could be likely to suspect him and could interfere effectively, and that is Leonilda's lover, Harry Destrier. And now he wins over to his side and silences, by these purchases and apparent interest in his career, the only man who could otherwise be likely to baulk him. What am I to do? I *will* save her. But how?"

"And it is all the nobler of him," prattled on Regina, "because I am sure Harry was jealous of him—how absurd! With regard to Hilda. He cannot be jealous now."

"Exactly as I had imagined," thought the other to herself; "only rather worse."

Then she spoke aloud.

"Regina dear! you should not form such extravagantly high opinions of anybody, especially of men, lest you should be obliged to change them."

"I shall never change my opinion of Sir Everard."

"I sincerely hope you will not. Only you would be much more likely not to do so, if you would now only believe him to be more like other people, with their faults and weaknesses."

"But he is not like other people."

"Do you suppose he is perfect?"

"Of course not, but he is much better than anybody—any man, I mean (except Mr. Pomeroy), that I ever heard of."

"And do you think he cannot be mistaken like others?"

"No, for he was wrong about your water-colours."

"Where has he seen them? You did not bring him here ever, Regina, did you?" she asked quickly, and almost fiercely.

"Of course not. He has not seen your water-colours; only my copies of them, and he said the originals must have been painted

in England. How I did crow over him, and told him that you had done them here in Florence."

"Yes, from memory," and she sighed.

One would almost have thought that, listening to Regina's simple straightforward happy talk, she would have been satisfied that the girl was not only not in love, but not likely to fall in love with the man whom she now praised, now "crowed over," with like enthusiasm. But she was anything but satisfied; her fears were only fortified by it all, and she returned to the point from which Regina's straying merriment had led them.

"Depend upon it, he can be wrong in more serious things than that. It is very natural that you should enjoy his society; but a girl always repents in the end, if she exalts a mere man into a demi-god. Of that be quite sure, Regina."

"But I do not exalt him into a demi-god. I like him, that is all, just as mamma likes him, as Hilda likes him, as Mr. Pomeroy likes him, as everybody likes him who knows him."

"That I can believe," she remarked, with another sigh.

"You kind dear creature!" exclaimed Regina, "I think you are jealous of him."

Instead of rebutting the accusation, her companion clutched at it, and said:

"Well, let us suppose I am; and let us see if I have not good reason. Since you say so, I will ask you, Regina; whom do you like best, him or me?"

She watched and waited for the answer with a look of the keenest anxiety.

"Why, you know, you are quite different. Indeed, I never thought of asking myself the question. I like you both so much."

"Which would you rather went away from you?"

"I should not like either of you to go."

"But suppose that one of the two must leave you, that you must lose one or the other, which would you choose it to be?" Regina remained silent. "Tell me."

"Well, if it were only going away for a short time, perhaps I should let you go. But if it were for ever, then—oh! I don't know.

But I like you best, I am sure I do, or I will do." And she flung her arms round her friend's neck and kissed her fondly. "There! are you satisfied?"

Outwardly, she was obliged to be. Inwardly, she was only more anxious than ever.

"Alas!" she thought and sighed to herself when she was again alone, "what a wonderful thing is the innocence of us girls as long as we are permitted to remain ignorant! We know and yet we know not. We immure within our young breasts a restless fearsome secret which is never wholly confessed even to ourselves till it is fatally and without recal confessed to somebody else. So do children play upon the beach of the great sea, toying with the fringe of its advancing waves. At last there comes a bigger breaker, precipitated by the rude ocean which they dread but cannot forbear from tempting. Then away they scamper, but far too late not to be dashed, perhaps drenched, with the chilling foam! So plays poor dear Regina. I will—I must —tell her her own secret. She shall con-

fess it to me before she irretrievably confesses it to him. Sooner than she shall suffer hurt, I will meet him face to face. And yet——"

In a moment her whole expression changed, and the features which anon bespoke brave feminine resolve, now told no other tale than that of tearful feminine weakness.

A few days later, when Sir Everard went to pay his usual evening visit, the servant, on opening the door to him, said that they were all up on the open loggia atop of the next house, but that he could get to them through a narrow little staircase which she pointed out. Up he went, and found there Leonilda, her lover, and Regina, but not Mrs. Vanari.

"I thought your mamma was with you, or I should have gone in to her. How is she?"

"I do not think she is very poorly," said Regina, "but she is in such low spirits."

"She may well be," blurted out Leonilda; "the Signor has been so unkind and queer to her—to us all lately."

Delafosse thought this scarcely a subject

to discuss with them, and went and stood by Regina, the other two talking apart. It was a lovely May night, full of stars, and sweet, and silent.

"I wish you could do something," said Regina. It seemed to her the most natural thing in the world, when anything went wrong, to appeal to him. "It is so wretched and uncomfortable."

"What is?"

"The way that the Signor has been behaving, and I don't know why. He has begun again about poor little Hilda's engagement, without any reason. And then he is never at home now at all, and I am sure he is unkind to mamma, or she would not be so miserable as she has been the last few days. Oh, it makes me so wretched." And a tear dropped from her long lashes.

He was so close to her, that without giving the thing a thought, and from sheer natural compassion coupled with the familiar affection he felt for her, he placed his lips against her temple, and said:

"Don't fret, Regina! it will be all right soon. I will see if anything can be done."

She shrank just a little; but seeing that he did not notice her gesture and that his look was what it always was, she said nothing, and repressed any further manifestation of timidity or hesitation. Indeed, he added immediately, almost before she had time for speech:

"Go over and join *them*. I shall go to Mrs. Vanari."

He descended and found her alone, and evidently trying to hide the traces of tears. Of these he took no notice, but spoke for some time upon indifferent subjects. At length she herself commenced.

"I *must* tell you: I cannot help it. I thought of telling Mr. Pomeroy; then, I could not. Perhaps, I ought not to tell you, but—oh! I am so miserable!"

"Why?"

"My husband."

"What about him?"

"Well, you know what a good fellow he is, how agreeable, how pleasant: for an Italian, indeed, quite a wonder."

"That does not make you miserable."

"But he is so changed lately. I don't

know whether you have noticed it, but his great fault is inordinate vanity. A woman who flatters him can do almost anything with him."

"I can easily believe that, though I have had no opportunity of judging."

"It is so. Heaven knows I never interfere. I do not know where he goes, unless he chooses to tell me, which, I believe, he always does. But when a man comes and talks to his wife as he has talked to me for the last fortnight about another woman, it is rather too much. You will say I am foolish, and ought to take no notice."

"Yes, I do say so."

"But you have not heard him, and I have. Besides, I have taken notice, and remonstrated with him."

"Thereby making matters worse, I suppose."

"Precisely. I have hardly seen him these last three days; and when he does come home he takes no notice of me, but vents his ill humour on the children. The woman holds him in the hollow of her hand."

"She will let him go soon enough, if you take no notice."

"Will she, though? He is very handsome, as you know; but she has more motives than one in what she does."

"Probably she has no motive at all, and it is merely his weak masculine vanity, which time will correct."

"Has she no motive, though? Shall I tell you who it is?"

"If you think fit, Mrs. Vanari."

"La Marquise de Bonnefoi!"

CHAPTER VI.

MINING AND COUNTERMINING.

However harmless, and in some respects profitable, we, with our information, may be inclined to consider the visits of Sir Everard Delafosse to the home of Regina Benvenuto, it is quite certain that Miss Williams regarded them with a dread almost amounting to horror.

Whether she had better means of estimating their probable consequences than we as yet possess, we must be content to wait a little and see. Yet, let us not, meanwhile, be as swift to condemn her anxiety for Regina as he had been, when he had heard her inquiry whether or not he was married.

Had he known all that she had said to Regina since, most of which Regina, with all her frankness, necessarily could not repeat, he would have regarded her as the most pestilently intrusive of her sex.

We, however, can afford to be more tolerant. Indeed, what holier or more admirable relationship can there be than that in which a woman, herself yet young and full of charms but no longer innocent of danger, watches over the safety of another of her sex, younger though not more beautiful but blind as a baby to peril? Does even maternal love quite approach such totally unselfish affection as this? One's child is, after all, another oneself; and one is pledged by every interested tie to screen it from harm. But what unworthy or self-regarding motive can possibly enter here? Amongst its many beautiful devices, Roman Catholicism has represented each individual soul as having allotted to it a special angel guardian, whose office it is to strive to save from hurt its precious charge. Is not the anxious guardianship of one girl who knows, over another who knoweth not, still

more angelic, still more beautiful, and infinitely more pathetic? Usually the soul tended by the invisible monitor is a sinning soul, or at least a sinning and repenting soul, whilst the large-winged watcher is always sinless, and therefore unsympathetic. But in the earthly case which we suppose, and which, withal, is no idle supposition, the soul so lovingly, timidly, tearfully watched, is sinless quite, but in terrible danger, by its very innocence, of an irretrievable fall; while she who watches is fluttered with dread, since she herself knows, from sad experience, the treachery latent in every turn, the stumble possible at every step, the serpent hidden in every flower, of the path so pleasant till the trip shall come, or the bite be felt.

What sad experience had fallen thus early to the lot of Regina's pale-faced friend? Of what treachery had she been the victim, by what fall been bruised, of what cruel venom endured the sting? There are some stumbles that teach much though they apparently injure but little, some ambushes that fail but for ever after alarm

against another, some poisons whose insidiousness has been baffled, but therefore against which watch is henceforward vigilantly kept. Let us hope, till we can be certain, that such had been hers, and that she differed only from Regina in the sad acquisition of what we glorify as knowledge.

But, were her fears only general, or had they some special force as against Sir Everard? Her words, her conduct, her partisanship, so to speak, would seem to imply the latter. Yet, is it possible that the man whom we have all along trusted, and perhaps admired, was one of those for whom, rather than they should have been born, it were better that a millstone had been tied round their necks, and they had been cast into the sea? Again I say, we must wait and see. Only I would not willingly prepare for my readers such a bitter and disheartening anti-climax.

Regina's friend, however, was not long in returning to her curious questioning; and fortune so framed it that her questioning appeared to be remarkably opportune. They

were painting, side by side, conversation ebbing and flowing the while.

"Have you seen as much of Sir Everard Delafosse these last few days?"

"Quite as much: indeed more, I think."

"What does he call you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does he call you Miss Benvenuto?"

"But I am not Miss Benvenuto: Hilda is. But he calls her Hilda and me Regina, and we like it."

"Does he ever take hold of your hand?"

"I don't know: I don't notice. I think he does sometimes."

"Does he kiss you, Regina?" she asked, quickly and with a hard, straightforwardness that sounded almost savage.

"No, certainly not."

"Never?"

"No—except——"

"Except when?" She stopped in her work, opened wide her eyes, and looked steadily at her companion. "Tell me, Regina! I must know. Has he ever done so, or attempted to do so?"

"It sounds so absurd," Regina answered,

evidently perplexed but unable to hide or to tell anything but the truth, yet feeling certain that the literal truth would only deceive—"it seems so very absurd, and I know he meant nothing but kindness. But one night—the day before yesterday it was——"

"He tried to kiss you?"

"No, no. I was miserable about mamma, because she seemed so poorly and so low, and I was crying—at least the tears were in my eyes—and he just put his lips to my forehead to comfort me."

"And what did you do, Regina?" asked the other, eagerly.

"I did nothing. What could I do?"

"But did you not feel annoyed, angry, outraged?"

"No. I would rather he had not done it, because I do not like being treated altogether as a child, however much younger I may be than he is. That is all."

"Regina, you know how much I love you, and that I would do anything in the world for you."

"I know you would, darling."

They laid aside their brushes, put their arms round each other, and sat almost cheek to cheek.

"Indeed I would. But I will never see you again, you shall never come here and I will never go to see you, unless you promise me that, if he ever does so again, you will not only try to prevent him, but you will tell me the very next day. Will you promise me faithfully?"

"Yes, but I assure you——"

"Assure me of nothing, Regina, but that you will not suffer such — such——Well, never mind; but you will come and tell me at once, will you not?"

"Yes, I promise. But I do wish you could know him and see him, and see us all together, and then you would not scold me as you do. Come to our house this evening, and——"

"No, I have no desire to see him, and I am sorry that you do."

Here poor Regina fairly began crying.

"It is so hard. I like him, and I love you, and you are both so kind to me and so good, and yet you dislike without ever

having seen each other, and neither cares to put matters right by meeting."

The tears were ultimately dried by kisses, but the point was not yielded in the least. And long after Regina had said good-bye for that afternoon, the pale face was still gazing out over the lilies at the little window along the central valley of the Arno away to the sunlit pass of la Golfolina, which seemed withal, despite its matchless beauty, to bring her swimming eyes no ray of comfort.

That evening, there was evidently a big ball afoot somewhere, for the narrow streets of Florence were crowded with carriages, and all were wending in the same direction, that of a brave old Palazzo, whose name I cannot very well mention, but whose façade is by Michel Angelo Buonarotti. There was no confusion, however, no ill-temper, no calling upon the saints; for the Tuscan coachman is as decorous and courteous as the rest of his race. He had not much, however, to try him on this occasion. There was no call for him to go ever so many streets round, as in London or Paris, to turn

as best he might, and then extricate himself from the wilfulness of somebody else who had turned in precisely the opposite direction. This Palazzo, like its fellows in Florence, indeed in Italy, had a spacious covered portico, under which his horses entered with a loud rattle upon the solid old flagstones. Then his lord and ladies were set down, and he drove straight on into a big court-yard, and out into the highways again by another entrance similar to that by which he had approached.

The entry of the marble staircase was, of course, covered with a handsome pile carpet, but the sides were left bare for rows of orange-trees in delicious bloom. There was no difficulty in getting up it, no crush in the seven reception-rooms when you reached them, though there must have been nine hundred people in them. The only approach to a crowd was in the ball-room, where dancing was already at its height.

"How young the De Bonnefoi looks to-night. Parola mia! I could believe her to be eighteen."

"She has doubled that, you may take your oath."

"*Pur troppo.* But she still gets fresh lovers."

"Has she got one this evening?"

"Yes, look there!"

"*Diamine!* What a handsome fellow! Who is he?"

"*Non saprei.* I have not the faintest idea."

"Neither have I, though I think I once saw him in her box at the Pergola. Is he English?"

"*Chi lo sa?*" And a general shrug of shoulders.

"Body of Judas! how lovely she looks!"

"Here is Fitz Tempest; he will tell us. Pst! Fitz Tempest, who is that with the De Bonnefoi? An Englishman?"

"Yes; forget his name, but a baronetto, and wrote a book."

"How he sticks to her! I wonder where Vanari is. Won't he be in a fury? She has not fancied *him* very long."

"I thought you would come amongst us

at last, Sir Everard." She was speaking his own language at present, and she spoke it admirably. "You have been too churlish. Think how much we have lost!"

"*I* have lost, you mean, Marquise."

"Well, you *have* lost a good deal. We have been very gay ever since Easter, just because, I suppose, Lent came earlier and robbed us of our amusements at the other end. We are paying ourselves with interest now; usurious interest, now that we have you!"

"How terribly I must be in debt then! Had I the spleen, low fever? Tell me, Marquise, what had I? Whatever it was, it has all gone now. What lovely flowers!"

"Which will you have?"

"I would not rob and spoil your bouquet on any account."

"You must; it is a mere question of choice."

"Then this Cape jessamine."

"A moment. There. I will decorate you." And she fastened it to his coat before all eyes, intending it as a badge of servitude.

"You belong to me for the remainder of the evening."

"Too charmed. If you leave my side you will always find me here, waiting for you."

"But I will not leave it. I have not promised a single dance. You dance, of course?"

"Anything you wish—or rather, command. Do I not belong to you till sunrise. But I have not danced for years."

"You danced divinely once," she said; giving him a piercing look with her grey eyes. "But, perhaps, you have forgotten those days?"

"I recal them now," he said. "Let us renew them with this waltz."

A gentleman approached as she rose. It was Signor Vanari.

"I believe I have the promised honour, Madame la Marquise, of this waltz with you."

"Surely not," she said.

"In your own writing, madame." And he showed his card.

"Ah!" she said, assuming an air of weariness, and sinking back upon the ottoman from which she had just risen. "I shall not dance this waltz. What were you saying, Sir Everard?"

Delafosse had greeted Vanari, who returned his salute at first but coldly, and now darted at him a look of polished fury. But he sat down again, with an air of quiet satisfaction, by the side of the Marquise, her eyes at first following the retreating figure, and then returning to him with increased sparkle. They remained together nearly the whole evening; she quitting his side only once for an ambassador, and then returning with infinite tender apologies for what she called absence strictly compelled by etiquette.

"I think I must give Signor Vanari this galop before I go. I shall not stay for the cotillon, as you will not dance it. Don't you think I must?" She watched him closely.

"I do not see the necessity, but——"

Vanari was passing at the moment. She touched him with her fan.

"This galop is yours, if you will have it." She rose and took his arm. "Remember the theatricals on the third of June—the dress rehearsal, I mean. You have my card." And away she swept.

"She must suspect me," he said. "She cannot be such a fool. But whether she suspect or not, I will beat her again."

"And he thinks he will again foil me," she thought to herself, as she stood before the glass in her own boudoir, an hour later. "He thinks I wanted that fool Vanari's wearisome attentions, only in order to gain his, and fancies that he can cure Vanari's infatuation, and will then leave me in the lurch, as he left me at Vienna. But, my dear Sir Everard, you do not escape quite so readily this time."

"How does it answer?" asked Mr. Pomeroy, the following day.

"Well enough," answered Delafosse. "But it takes a little time to show an ass like Vanari that he *is* an ass. And the worst of it is, that if I do not soon succeed in showing him that she is fooling him to the top of his bent, I run the risk of failing

altogether. The Narracotts arrive to-morrow, and I must devote most of my time to them. Besides, I know Montagu will not want to stop here very long. He has not been in Italy before, and he wants to see something of the country, and when they go, I must go too."

"Bring them to me as soon as ever you like. I shall be delighted to see them; and if I can be useful in taking them off your hands at all, I suppose they would be content with me as a cicerone?"

"I should think so indeed—many thanks. Where could they get one better, or indeed so good?"

There is scarce a pleasure more complete and unalloyed than that of first showing a place we love to people whom we love. The honeymoon is usually a subject of conversational joke rather than of reverence, probably because it is so easy to poke a little fun at it, and so difficult to extol its advantages without sinning on the wrong side of the sentimental and tumbling into the ludicrous. But I am at a loss to conceive a purer and sweeter happiness than

that which I have not yet enjoyed, of conducting the steps of the one fair fond thing just entrusted to your charge, through the varied scenes of your boyish and then unaccompanied travel. Surely each bright flowing river flows still more brightly, each fable-clad ruin grows twice as holy and as haunted, each vine-covered slope bears more purple or opal bunches, each lofty hill looks loftier, each snow-crowned peak shows whiter, each blue lake waxes bluer, each grand cathedral grander, when seen a second time through the halo of that other vision? Bravely own as much, you to whom the gods have granted it; and generously pray that they keep it yet in store for those of us who have not hitherto been so favoured.

The greetings between Sir Everard and his dear friends Montagu and Countess, after nearly seven months of separation, were most cordial, and the enjoyment which he experienced in leading them about from wonder to wonder of the city which he had so often extolled and prayed them to visit, was little less than theirs. Montagu was in

even more than his usual magnificent spirits, and many Tuscan eyes were opened and many Tuscan tongues let loose at the sight of Countess, whose beauty, by some spell of her own, had kept Time completely at bay during Sir Everard's absence. They had no news for him which at all concerns our story, except that Rosie Raffles's last book had been still more successful than its predecessors, and that the authoress was, they had heard, somewhere on the Continent.

"We fully expected to find her here," said Countess, with a wicked smile, "perched upon some romantic terzo piano—is not that what you called it?"

"Third story: quite right. You shall soon speak pure Tuscan."

"With a view of your more magnificent suite on the first floor, but in the same palace."

"I have not heard a word of her since I saw you."

"Faithless swain!" How or why he had deserted Rosie, she neither knew nor guessed, though she intended him to tell her some day or other. But she was too

glad at his having deserted her, and at hearing that he had now no communication with her of any kind, not to forgive him for all his past misdeeds. "Faithless swain! What are those lines of Scott's, Montagu, about 'him the deceiver'? Oh, you know them, sir, do you? Take them to heart then, and mind you are not some day 'borne back by the flying.'"

However little he may have found them altered, they could not say the same of him. Kind and affectionate and attentive as ever, and even enthusiastic when he discoursed to them in cloister or gallery or piazza, he would relapse into long silences, and manifest an absence of mind never before noticeable in him, when immediate provocation to talk or attention was removed. He did not look older; but he looked graver, harder, and more settled in expression, betraying the sadness of as trong man. Those who had not known him in the olden time would not have noticed it at all; they would merely have pronounced him a man whom amiability alone saved from being too serious for his years. He laughed and joked

at times, but they were not the full free jokes and laughter of yore. A new acquaintance would have attributed his mien only to a grave thoughtful intellect; but his two friends saw that it sprang from a sorrow-laden heart.

They had been some days in Florence, and not a word had been said upon the subject which had been the main one when they were last together. At length one evening, Delafosse said, rising and going to the window and leaning out:

"I suppose you have heard nothing of Lily?"

"Not a word," said Countess. Montagu said nothing immediately; but as there was a significant silence, he went up to his friend, put his arm round him affectionately, and said: "Look here, dear old boy! You must get rid of that. I cannot think you are ever likely to see her again, or if you saw her, to see her as you would care to see her."

"Do you know anything, Montagu?" he asked, turning to his friend.

"Nothing, on my honour! I am only

advising you, as I think I have a right to advise. I can see well enough you have been thinking of nothing else since we parted, and it won't do. You used to be a brave fellow, and I am sure you can be one still. You must bury the thing, and be done with it."

"I cannot, Montagu!" he exclaimed, freeing himself, and turning away from the window and facing Countess, who looked up from some work with a face so, so sad: "I cannot, and that is all about it. Had anybody told me I could ever become such a slave, memory, will, and understanding, to one idea, and that idea a purely visionary one, I should have laughed in his face. I shall never find Lily, I know, and I am not quite such a fool yet—God knows what I may become—as to go about looking for her. But I want her, and I tell you I shall never cease to want her, till the invisible hand comes and sets all wants at rest."

His brows were gathered by his frowns into knots, with which alone, it was plain, he cowed the attempting tears. Countess's were falling; but fortunately he did not see

them. He went on. "Some pleasures and some pains are so immensely large that we require distance in order to measure them. I look back at the period that intervened between her flight and my leaving England with irrepressible amaze; and had I not felt and—well, suffered—quite sufficiently since, I should regard myself as the most heartless of mankind. Whilst still in England, I somehow contrived to put her away from me, to think if not ill, at least doubtingly of her, and sometimes not to think of her at all. I was stunned, I suppose, and felt but a portion of the blow. But the moment that I began to travel, the memory of her seemed to be pursuing me; and by the time I reached Rome towards the end of the year, it appeared to have overtaken me. It sat down by my side, it dogged, it haunted, it never left me. I came to Florence, and it came too. And, depend upon it, it will follow me to the uttermost end of the earth, go where I will. I try outwardly to do my best; but in my deep heart I want Lily, and nothing else will content me. Now, let us say nothing more about it."

These were the first words he had spoken about her since he quitted England. He had never mentioned her name or hinted at her history and his, either to Mr. Pomeroy, or to Mrs. Vanari, or to Regina.

He was now on his way to visit these last, and was pleased for once to find Mrs. Vanari alone.

"I am so glad you have come," she said, "though I have the worst news to communicate, and am perfectly miserable. Can you guess my husband's last ingenious means of venting his annoyance on us all, because I object to his servitude to that hateful woman."

"No. What is it? It cannot be anything very bad."

"It is, for us—whatever it may be for you. He has just been telling me that he will not allow you to come here so often. You come here far too much, he says; and that, since I am so very particular about women's conduct, I had better begin at home."

"But he has said nothing to *me* about it."

"He says that he will, if I do not. He

will not endure it any longer, he declares, and that, if I do not keep you out of the house, he will. You have not had any quarrel, have you?"

Instead of answering her question, Delafosse asked:

"Have you told Hilda and Regina what he says?"

"I have not seen them since; but of course I shall be obliged to tell them, since you will not be able to come so often. I don't know what they will do, they will be so miserable."

"But you must not tell them," he said; "and it is fortunate I have come in time to prevent you. You asked me just now if your husband and I have had a quarrel."

"You surely have not, have you?"

"Not precisely; but something has occurred, or is still occurring, which accounts for his conduct even more than a quarrel would. Now you must not be angry with me?"

"For what?"

"I did not intend to tell you; at any rate not till I had succeeded. But I *must* tell you

now. I know what the Marquise de Bonnefoi is, and what she is made of, and I am determined that your husband shall know it too. She is fooling his vanity, nothing more, and *I* am trying to undeceive him. I have gone into society again—don't laugh—I have gone into society again, and am trying to cut him out with the Marquise."

She did not laugh at all; she looked very much astonished, but also very grave, and said:

"It is very good of you, and I hope your attempts may succeed. But I fear you are only troubling and will injure yourself, without benefiting him or me. Oh! he is so vain."

"Let us wait and see. If she does not see what I'm driving at, I shall succeed to a certainty. If she does see through it, and she is precious sharp, it will be much more difficult. She certainly gave me the preference at once, simply because I am an Englishman, and I have long resisted her. But every now and then she does something to humour his vanity and hold him fast."

"What a fiend she is! Really, he is the best fellow in the world, and, for an Italian, has been an excellent husband. But he is the vainest man I ever knew, and cannot help being flattered by a woman who is so celebrated. I fear you will do no good. Only his vanity was entangled before; take care that you do not involve his pride."

"No fear about that. When he is once convinced that she does not care the least for him, I will soon convince him that she does not care any more for me, nor I for her."

"It is a dangerous process. See what you have done already by it! You cannot come here as you did."

"Never?"

"He did not say that, though he probably will say it soon. But you must not come so often. I shall miss you immensely, but the children will miss you still more. They must not know the real reason; I would not let them know, for worlds, about him and the Marquise. They are so good, and innocent, and, oh!—of course I could not tell them."

"Then you must not tell them that he has forbidden you to receive me so often."

"In that case they will think you are tired of them, and that will make them very unhappy, and also consider you very unkind."

"It cannot be helped; but it can be partially remedied in this way. As you know, my friends Mr. and Mrs. Narracott are in Florence. I intended to bring them here to-morrow evening, but now I cannot. However, you can tell Regina and Hilda, as an excuse for my absence, that I have to go about with them. Indeed, the day after to-morrow, Mr. Narracott and I are going off for a three days' expedition to Vallombrosa, Camaldoli, and La Vernia; Mr. Pomeroy having promised to see to Mrs. Narracott during our absence."

"Dear Mr. Pomeroy! I told him my trouble."

"And I, my plan; and he approves it."

"I cannot say that *I* do; but you shall do as you like."

So that when, a few days later, Regina's friend, unremitting in her aroused anxiety,

fell again to asking questions about Sir Everard, Regina seemed, at first, so unwilling to talk about him, that her companion's fears touched a point which they had not hitherto reached. She was all the more pressing in her inquiries, and was, at length, somewhat consoled by discovering a different reason for the attempt at reticence than she had been driven by her dread to imagine.

"I don't think he cares for me any longer," she said, when, at length, she was induced to make a clean breast of it: "for us, I mean," she added, correcting herself. "He does not come any longer as he used to do. He has been but twice this last week."

Her mother had, of course, told both her and her sister that he was occupied with attending to his friends, who were strangers to Florence. But, however much this might satisfy Hilda—and it did not wholly satisfy even her—it had seemed to Regina the lamest excuse in the world.

"In that case," she answered, "he came to us so often, merely because there was nobody else."

"But there are scores of people in Florence, my dear," her mother had rejoined, "more charming than you are, to whom he might have gone, had he wished."

"I dare say there are, mamma; but then he did not want to go to them. We were enough for him; and now he does not care for us at all, I am sure."

"Nonsense, child. Mr. and Mrs. Narracott are both old friends of his."

"So are we—or used to be. But we are very stupid, and I wonder he has been able to put up with us so long. I do not mean you, mamma, for you are so clever; but with Hilda and me."

Perhaps even rather more and keener disappointment than could be gathered from these words crept out in her avowals to her friend, who had to discount a good deal of her first impulsive feeling of consolation, before Regina came to the end of all that she had to say on the subject.

"I don't think he ever cared for us. Why should he? For me, at any rate. I know I cannot amuse anybody. But then he ought not to have come at all."

"Did I not tell you, Regina, that you would probably not think so immensely of him some day as you seemed to think a short while ago?"

"But I think quite as much of him as ever I did; it is myself that I think less of. I thought I must have something in me when he could endure much of my society; but now that I find he cannot any longer——"

And though tears did not come, no more words did.

"And so you really think that is the reason, Regina?"

"Partly," she said. "Partly, too, I dare say, it is my fault; indeed yours, if you will not be angry for my saying so."

"My fault! I certainly shall not be angry; but how is it my fault?"

"Oh, I don't know. Don't let us talk of it."

"But we must talk of it. Tell me."

"Well, you know, since you spoke to me about his—his—he meant nothing by it——"

"His kissing you."

"He did not kiss me, he only—well, you know—ever since then, since you put I don't know what into my head, and said what you did say, I have always felt strange with him—different—I cannot tell you how, but—oh! I wish we had never talked about it at all."

"You have been more distant and cautious with him, you mean?"

"Yes: I could not help being so, after what you said."

"I am very glad to hear it."

"Of course, that has made him quite different with me; has made him also cautious and distant. Indeed, I do not think he likes me at all now."

How little real truth there was in this we know. Perhaps he had once or twice imagined that she was not quite so familiar with him: but he either attributed it to his own fancy, or explained it to himself on the score of her growing older from day to day, and therefore more likely to increase in reserve than in freedom. The poor girl credited it with being the cause of his recent absence and apparent estrangement.

Her friend, however, biased by her already obstinately-formed conception of his purposes, saw in it only an additional evidence of unworthy design.

"He merely wants to pique you, Regina," she said. "If what has occurred be my fault, I am very glad of my fault, and am willing to bear all the blame of it, even from you, for the love I bear you, dear. Just because you have at last treated him as you ought to have treated him all along, he tries to make you feel the weight of your own right-doing, and of his displeasure. Men are like that, darling; they are cruel to those who will not have their sometimes crueller kindness."

"I do not understand you," said Regina, simply. "But you forget that I told you he has other friends here now, to whom he must pay some attention."

The argument which she had found so poor in her mother's mouth, and which had just now figured in her own only to be discredited as long as nobody but herself was attacking Sir Everard, was now brought forward as of considerable validity when

another defamed him, and she had to cast about her for a defence.

Women are rarely good and never discreet dialecticians. It would have been easy for Miss Williams, and she immediately afterwards discovered that it would have been best, to have contented herself with pointing out this inconsistency to Regina and answering her second argument with her first. But, unfortunately, she had another crushing reply to it; and, in the thoughtless moment of winning, she used it, little thinking that it might directly be turned to the very end which she most desired to prevent.

"It is all nonsense about his friends, and you know it is. But, if you wanted a proof, I know that he does not spend all his time with them. He tells you that he does not go into society."

"Neither does he."

"But he does; and not only that, but he spends most of his time, when there, with the very Marquise de Bonnefoi that he prevented you from knowing, and that he said was not a fit companion for you."

"He said she was not a fit companion even for himself."

"She is his constant companion."

"Who told you so?"

"She told me so herself. She was here yesterday, looking at my water-colours again."

"But Sir Everard says she tells such lies she is not to be trusted."

"See here, at any rate!" And she held up the *Gazzetta Ufficiale*. "Here is his name among the visitors at the Palazzo—I forget its name."

There it was, truly and honestly enough, and true enough also, for once, was the De Bonnefoi's skilfully communicated information. But when she who had thus unskilfully passed it on, saw the drop in Regina's lip, and the moisture in her eyes, she perceived and repented her unstrategic blunder.

"Oh, how stupid of me!" she said to herself when she was alone. "I told her the very thing I ought not to have told her, and have only assisted him by my indiscretion. He knows that he has touched

her heart already, perceives her altered behaviour, attributes it to her timidity and to her growing consciousness of her real feelings for him, and is now taking the one final step, that of piquing her by absence, which alone is necessary in order to subdue her altogether. And I have played his game by telling her about la Marquise, for that will double, treble, her pique, and so make her still more pliant when the moment of reconciliation comes, as he intends it to come at a favourable opportunity. What if I have been playing his game for him all along! What shall I do?" And she wrung her hands as in irrepressible despair. "Come what will, I will save her. Let me think. At present, I have time in my favour, for nothing can occur whilst he affects to remain away; and the moment he returns and forces on her a perilous explanation, I will get to know it from her. But I must know before, I must——" She paused. "To think of it! That I should be—that he—that—But I *will!* Nothing shall prevent me. What matters the future to me, now?

Regina shall be saved from peril, if my heart snap asunder in the attempt. Heaven knows that my motives are pure. I would not injure him, any more than I will let him injure her. But come what will—at all cost—at all pain—to me, she shall not suffer."

CHAPTER VII.

UNDER THE COWL.

Perhaps the purest and most inexpressible physical pleasure which the human frame can enjoy, is the sensation which may be his who delivers himself up without reserve to the sudden advent of an Italian spring. In the timid vernal approaches of the northern year, in the shy tentative transitory efforts at sunny weather, the alternate cloud and clearness, the recurring earnests of a change so slow to arrive, there is a charm not to be gainsaid. Perhaps nowhere has it been so well expressed as in the third Eclogue of Spenser's "Shepherd's Calendar," where Thomalin is made to say:

> For Winter's wrath begins to quell,
> And pleasant Spring appeareth:
> The grass now 'gins to be refreshed,
> The swallow peeps out of her nest,
> And cloudy welkin cleareth.

But in the Ausonian spring there is no "beginning to be." Without any premonitory coquetry, but with a single impulsive breath, it conquers coyness and liberally displays at once its charms. No birds peep out; they are all upon the wing. Welkin there is none; there is only an eternally receding blue. Upon the far mountain-tops, the snow still lies as white as in deepmost winter; but down the lower slopes and in the exuberant valleys there is a sudden array of enchanting greenery on sod and spray. Every flower that has a name, and every insect that has a wing, starts like magic and as at the bid of a fairy's wand from the thrall of hibernation, and flaunts and flutters with all the colours of the prism in a glittering air. Over the bare walls of yesterday wave enormous lilies, and in and out of their gaping cracks the green lithe-tailed lizards come to sport in the pleasant scorch of the sun. Night is not long enough

for Philomel, who refuses to be sad in that exhilarating clime, sings down the shamed linnet and the thrush, and fills even the pleasant noontide with the mellifluous ripple of his silvery shake. Pan cannot be dead. There are hamadryads, you will swear, in that sparkling copse; and some nimble naiad nestles, for any wager in the world, by yonder trickling well. Listen! Even the sturdy bell-wethers cease to crop the thyme, and suspend their woolly necks and impromptu ringing, whilst the clear pagan pipe travels waywardly up and down the facile atmosphere. Swell, ye luscious grapes, grow of a darker green ye epicurean olives, bulge out plump figs, and answer to the carol of the enfranchising Primavera!

Sir Everard Delafosse and Montagu Narracott had taken train from Florence to Pontassieve, there been packed in a rapid rumble-tumble and driven as far as Pelago, and thence started on the roughest of colts under the guidance of excellent Antonio of that ilk, upon whom and whose dainty little niece who served them honest dinner, be the best of Tuscan blessings! They were

beyond the sound of the torrent, whose local name of Ellero would seem to have been given to itself by its own reverberating roll, and had passed the stone cross that juts out boldly beyond the little hamlet of Tosi. Antonio had doffed his hat and signed himself religiously as he passed it, though he had briefly catalogued the maids and matrons at its foot as "donzelle dei monaci." At every upward stride of their shaggy steeds they seemed to be inverting the year. It was the end of May, and in Florence and its immediate vicinity, the intoxicating sense of spring arrived, had, of course, wholly passed away, but here it was again in these glorious summits, as though it had retreated to their luscious solitude from the summer invasion of the city and the vale. The chestnuts and the beeches were well but only just abloom, and the oaks wanted another night or two to wake fully into forest life. Soon, however, the chestnuts disappeared, and then the beeches waxed scarce and far between, and the few oaks that ever and anon could be de-

scried, seemed locked in the iron clutch of as yet but half relenting winter. Suddenly, and the sun was gone; not below the horizon, but from their sight. From it, too, had departed everything but the encompassing shade of straight unbroken firs, and from their ears all but the roar and dash of unseen waterfalls. At length the perpendicular trunks began to stand away farther from each other; sunlight got in and among them, and there was again a sight and sense of greenery. A moment more, and meadows green as in any island of the West burst upon their enchanted vision; deep-toned bells rang to frugal fare, long straight figures in brown serge were dotted about a huge stone gateway, and the sanctuary of Vallombrosa was before them, bidding them welcome for the night.

It is not an interesting monastery. Its denizens appear to be neither learned, austere, nor genial. They had something to say against "Modern liberty in the sense of Nero," which Delafosse duly translated to his companion, but nothing else worth re-

peating; and the two travellers were glad to be left alone to their smoke and their talk.

"By the way, Montagu, what sort of a reception has Champion's book on the 'Metamorphoses of Morals' met with?"

"None at all, my boy. It fell dead at once; indeed, it was still-born. Some critics took the pains of laughing at it, but not many. Of course I did not read it; I do not profess to read such things; I leave them to learned Thebans like you. But I fancy it was great nonsense. Have you heard anything of the man himself?"

"Not a word since I left England: except that I had a note from him forwarded to me to Rome, informing me that he was bringing it out. Of course I could not get the book sent me to Rome; the very name of it would get it stuck on the Expurgatorial Index at once. But I got it soon after reaching Florence, and have recently been reading it."

"You are probably the only man who has done so. And what do you make of it?"

"It is not quite the nonsense that you

suppose it to be, and contains matter enough out of which to make three or four good books. But it is, itself, no approach to a good book, and Champion is probably incapable of writing one. He has no sense of proportion, no faculty of arrangement. He has more learned furniture than he can house, and so it becomes lumber, over which the reader only stumbles. But I fully expected it."

"He always seemed to me a very queer fish. Where the deuce does he come from?"

"I really cannot tell you, any more than where he has gone to."

Antonio had them up betimes the following morning; and after dropping a dozen lire into the hand of the lay-brother who had attended on them, they were in the saddle and bound for Camaldoli. O bewitching woods, where exquisite patches of emerald green turf, and surprising interventions of pink-and-white cherry bloom, stood out in beautiful bright relief against the shaggy firs and towering pines! O memorable long day's ride, when God's lovely

world was loveliest, through scenes of varied never-to-be-represented beauty, which even His lavish and dexterous prodigality has not, on this planet at least, surpassed!

It was again evening when they heard the modulated rush of the vagrant tumbling Giogana, and descried the little forest-surrounded belfry, the long white habits and well-tended beards of the clean-looking religious of Camaldoli. The pink of polished gentlemen received them, uniting to grace, delicacy, and sanctity of physiognomy, the charm of the sweetest voice uttering itself in choicest Tuscan. They were most welcome. Were they not tired, and would they not eat? He was sorry to say that he could offer them nothing but "magro" fare, for it was an abstinence day, and the rules of Mother Church must be observed even by strangers. They were very hungry, they said, Sir Everard especially so, inasmuch as, truth to tell, he had been but indifferently well that day, and had not yet tasted food.

"In that case," said the holy prior, "I must dispense you, and allow you to have some meat."

Sir Everard protested. He was giving trouble, he was infringing their rules, he was so sorry. The father was too kind.

"*Il mio dovere:* only my duty to do so." And with a bow that would have shamed any modern Versailles, he walked measuredly away to order their meal.

"What was that all about?" said Montagu, who had stood by, a listener, but not an intelligent one, of the conversation.

Delafosse could not help laughing at once, for he knew what Montagu would say.

"He has gone to order dinner and supper, whichever you like to call it."

"But is it that confounded 'magro' again to-day?"

"Yes, my boy, it is, but he has 'dispensed' *me*. I let out that I had been seedy all day and not eaten, and he is going to order me some broth and some meat."

"And I?" said poor Narracott, aghast.

"Will have another Apician feast of maccaroni and herbs."

And Delafosse roared with laughter.

"What a swindle! What a do! You know all about it, you leery beggar, you!

Catch me coming to foreign parts again without knowing their lingo and their tricks. You're just as well as I am, you——"

But the meal was brought in: strong, smoking, fragrant broth for Delafosse, and for Montagu the chastest lentils. And whenever the name of Sir Everard is mentioned, the first story to this day that Narracott has to tell against him, is the mean, shameless, impious manner in which he deceived the credulous prior of Camaldoli, and left his friend, his innocent newly-arrived friend, in the lurch, and to the gnawing pangs of unmitigated "magro."

But he was forced to own that, sitting round the big open fireplace, smoking by the crackling fire (still necessary, of a night, in that elevated spot), consisting of three huge long pine-logs placed like radii from its blazing centre and pushed up with the feet as the central points were gradually consumed, and listening to the handsome soft-tongued prior, made one of the most delightful evenings he had ever enjoyed. He understood scarce a word of what was said;

but he averred, and he did not exaggerate, that the mere uncomprehended flow of that on one side perfect discourse was music surpassing all sounds to which he had ever listened. The language, the voice, the look, the gestures, were all so perfect, and so harmonious, that Sir Everard listened and listened, smitten himself into silence.

"What has he been saying just now?" asked Narracott. "It was awfully lovely, whatever it was."

"He has been describing the chanting of matins and lauds in the church by night. Tearful he says it is; you caught the word, did you not, as he spoke? *flebile, flebile?*"

"Yes, that was it. How much I should like to hear it!" Some more Italian passed, and then Delafosse said:

"We can, if we like; they will call us. But he says it is not much at this time of the year."

However, it was agreed that a lay-brother should call them at half-past two, and conduct them into the church. Delafosse seemed

to himself to have only just dropped off to sleep when he was roused by Montagu's loud English voice.

"I can't make this coon understand," he said, "and he can't make me understand either, for that matter. But look here, it's half-past three, and we were to have been called at half-past two, and the whole bag of tricks, singing and '*flebile*,' and that sort o' business, must be over by this time."

Delafosse roused himself, and then gathered from the lay-brother that he had forgotten to call them before.

"Ask the benighted brother why he calls us now, then."

No satisfactory answer came to this question, except that matins and lauds must certainly be over by this. Whereupon, after learning the nature of the reply, Narracott proclaimed his intention of returning at once to bed, but not without giving it as his private opinion that, though "sell" might not be very good Tuscan, that was the nature of the transaction in which he was at that moment cutting the principal figure, in his night-shirt.

"There has been no '*flebile*' to-night, you

may take your oath of it, and I'm strongly inclined to think that '*flebile's*' an uncommon rare occurrence. It's a mighty fine thing to talk about over a comfortable fire at eight o'clock; but when it comes to two o'clock in the morning and getting out of bed for it, brother monk knows better than that; and you may depend upon it that all the '*flebile*' that has been done to-night has been done under the blankets."

They both laughed merrily and went off to sleep again. The next morning was spent in scaling the very summits, still winter-held, of the monastery's magnificent pine forest, and in visiting the Sagro Eremo, or eremitical sanctuary attached to Camaldoli, a mile and a half higher up the glen. Here Sir Everard heard a marvellous story, of which he solemnly promised Montagu to make a long narrative and descriptive poem, but which, as he has not yet done so, I must forbear from telling. The afternoon was passed in fresh rambling among the paths of the forest, by snow-suckled torrents drawing lusty life from the hoar-covered summits whither in the morning they had clambered.

They could not resist spending another night at Camaldoli, again enjoying the charm of the prior's converse, in which, to confirm Montagu's suspicions, again drily repeated, figured no allusion to the disappointment of the previous night, and no offer to compensate them for it.

The sun had just begun to dip from the extreme height of its terrestrial arc when, the following afternoon, they splashed through the Corsalone torrent, and commenced to mount the rugged, steep, and often winding seam of road that labours through rocks and scanty pasturage to the cloud-attempting sanctuary of La Vernia. Even brave Antonio puffed and toiled, and gave the first symptoms that even the legs of mountain guides can grow older. Abstemiousness itself, he could not resist following the example and exhortation of his clients and quenching labour-thirst at the little inn called La Breccia. Thence to the monastery is but a stone's-throw, but a stone's-throw, it seems, straight up into the air. How could horses' legs hold on? Flies might. But the ascent was mastered at last, and the hoofs of

their horses rattled along the paved cloisters of a Franciscan home four thousand feet above the sea.

The poor brown-clad fellows were very dirty, and had very little to offer, but were very glad to see them. They were the first visitors that year, the first, in fact, since the beginning of the winter, which up there could still scarcely be said to be completely over. Bolts and bars were undone, and shutters taken down, and big keys hunted for, and then they were shown into the rooms set apart for visitors. They were very different from the spacious but comfortable apartments in which they had been housed at Camaldoli. These were small and scarcely furnished at all; and the key had evidently never been turned on them since the summer of the bygone year. Bundles of half-dried sticks, comfortless contrast to the pine-logs liberally thrust in endwise by the bearded white-habited friars, were set ablaze, but soon were extinguished in their own blue-grey smoke. Food was produced; and, though it was not a day of fast, the fat of La Vernia was, Narracott

groaned, far inferior even to the "magro" of pleasant Camaldoli. They were the poor children of poor St. Francis, owned nothing, begged from door to door, in cities daily growing less liberal, whatever little they possessed and could thus again dispense. They had no more eggs. Nor cheese? No; and appetite for milk and butter was received as though something was being asked for of which they had never heard.

Yet, for all their poverty, the really great man whose name they invoked and whose habit they wore, would scarcely have owned them as his sons. I dare say they are chaste and obedient too; but they wallow in idleness, ignorance, and dirt. No lofty countenances, no holy manners, no idiomatic Tuscan, no industrious hands.

"*Siete*" (no courteous *sono*, as they had invariably heard at Camaldoli) — "Siete Francesi, you are French, are you not?"

"No, we are both English."

"England is near America, is it not? Why does not your friend talk, as you do? Does he not know Italian?"

"He seems not to do," said Delafosse,

laughing. "Egli è furbo, he's a cunning dog."

"Non è peccato; that's no harm."

Delafosse explained this last remark, telling Montagu that if he remained in Italy all his life, he would never hear anything that would give him the key to the national character more surely than that brief rejoinder. They were very curious; but their curiosity was more like that of a herd of cattle interrupted in their grazing, than of intelligent beings.

"Who is the Provincial of the Order?"

"*Eh! non sapremmo;* we really cannot tell you; we do not know."

What did they know, he wondered, these sombre denizens of the snow and pine-clad hill-tops, who could not tell the name of their immediate Superior, and thought that England was near to America!

"I tell you what," said Narracott, "I'll lay you a wager, though, they do 'flebile' here, and no sham or shirking, and do it regular, too. They're dirty, and, saving their presence, desperately stupid; but they pray no end, I'll warrant, and there's as much

'*flebile*' business done here in a week as is done at t'other place in a century. Just you ask 'em!"

Delafosse did so; and there was an immediate chorus of assenting voices to the effect that they had matins and lauds every night about two o'clock after midnight, and if the sir strangers would like to be present they should be called.

"Take my word for it, we shall have it to-night; and as there's precious little to eat, we'll go to bed early and have a good pillowful before our devotions commence. Have a cigar, old cock?" And he held one out to the monk who was by, and who understood the action, however happily unintelligible were the words, of cheery Montagu. He lit it with a relish, and the fragrant fumes soon brought more of his brothers to the spot, to whom Narracott extended the welcome offer, in no instance refused.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Why, of course we should; it's the very thing we have been asking for, you sly old duffers. Thank me for that, Master Everard! I think I've spoken the language this time, to

some purpose. Those cigars have fetched them a precious sight quicker than all your elegant "*issimos*" and "*mentes*."

They had another magnificent ramble, away among astounding firs and venerable pines, returned as dusk closed in about the monastic cloisters, had some more coffee, and retired to rest. Faithful to promise, at half-past two a brother came and roused them with the due Latin salutation, waited for a couple of minutes whilst they hastily threw on their clothes, and conducted them through dimly-lit corridors to the church.

It was a large and lofty structure, but within it was no light save that of the lamp burning before the sanctuary, and the little *lampione* by whose one scarce-burning wick the brother had led them to the church, and which he had placed on the oaken prie-dieu when he had posted them there and left them. Three monks, and three only, could be dimly descried kneeling at long distances one from the other. All the remaining confraternity were in the choir behind the altar, and therefore invisible; but their melancholy voices wailed aloud in monotonous chant

through the sacred and obscure pile. It rose and fell, swelled and waned, but never ceased, discordant concord of souls rather than of tongues pouring out in the language of the dead the prostrate plaint of utter abasement and self-annihilating confession. At length there was the sound as of many kneeling figures shuffling to their feet; a lantern was thrust through each low postern on either side of the altar, and out they came, two and two, moving slowly down the nave, reciting in tearful unison the magnificently mournful Psalm of him who was after God's own heart.

"Amplius lava me ab iniquitate mea," wept out their fifty voices in the solemn dimness, "et a peccato meo munda me." "Wash me yet more from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin."

They swept slowly on by where Sir Everard and Montagu stood, the blood cold in their veins, and trembling with sympathetic dread; and as the last two brethren passed, they too joined on, though in silence, to the awful procession.

"Quia iniquitatem meam ego cognosco,"

they wailed aloud with terrible distinctness, their voices swelling as if in painful eagerness to reach a distant God and assure him of their vileness, "et peccatum meum coram me est semper." "Because I know my iniquity, and my sin is always before me."

The piteous tuneful clamour ceased not, but a big bolt was audibly being pushed back, big doors were audibly grating on their hinges, and lo! through two archways of a huge solid balcony hewn from the rough rock that looked down straight on the far-stretching valley of the Casentino and away to the clear-lying Umbrian hills, an Italian moon at full was directly shining. Vale, and river, and hill, and many-coloured foliage, lacked no distinctness of the day, and the air was soft and balmy, though with a touch of the yet unmelted snow above. But the measured tread and unbroken chant of the long cenobitical procession went on, and they turned from the golden moonlight into a winding subterranean cloister, on one side whereof were rudely frescoed scenes from the life of St. Francis, and on the other iron-barred per-

forations in the rock, through which, at intervals, the rays of the moon broke slantingly. The two lanterns, the only artificial light, blinked far ahead as in a mist, but all along the meandering line the psalm of abasement went on.

"Quia in iniquitate conceptus sum, et in peccato concepit me mater mea." "For, behold, I was conceived in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."

The shuffle of sandalled feet seemed to cease. They were entering a little underground chapel, beyond the open door of which Sir Everard and his friend were not permitted to enter. But they could make out that the altar-piece was a splendid Crucifixion, life-size, of Luca della Robbia, and they were close to the brothers who had entered last. These were all now upon their knees, the psalm was approaching to its close, and almost a surge of vocal comfort intruded on the despondent strain as they still chanted aloud:

"Sacrificium Deo est spiritus contribulatus; cor contritum et humiliatum, Domine, non despicies." "A sacrifice to God is an

afflicted spirit; a contrite and humble heart, O Lord, thou wilt not despise!"

The voices ceased, and there was silence even more awful than their chant. It endured for about ten minutes, during which they prayed in an under-breath that sometimes rose to a whisper, and then they rose to their feet, evidently about to return. The two strangers stood aside, one on either side the door, as the friars came through, and again they tailed on to the procession as it re-formed and wended its regular way back through the subterranean cloister into the moonlight, thence again into the church, up the nave, and through a side-door into an inner cloister, round which ran their cells.

"Did you ever see or feel anything like this in your life?" whispered Montagu. "It was 'flebile' with a vengeance."

"Magnificent," murmured Delafosse. "But, I say, whatever you see me do, take no notice. You know your way; and walk straight on, and go back to bed."

They were in the inner cloister as he said this, and the monks were dropping off one

by one into their cells, the doors closing after each of them as with the sound of the gate of the grave. There was only one dim light in all the passage, and Sir Everard had scarcely spoken these last words when Narracott saw him quietly re-open a door which had just been closed by the monk who had passed through it, enter the cell, and disappear.

He halted a moment from sheer wonder; but obeying the strictly and only just-uttered injunction, he strode straight on to their jointly-allotted chamber. He waited nearly half an hour for Delafosse, who came not. Still lost in marvel, but sleepy and cold, he tumbled into bed, and was soon again in the unconsciousness of slumber.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN IMPENITENT PENITENT.

The monk whom Sir Everard had followed into his cell had not heard the reopening of the door after he himself had closed it, but had walked to the little grated window at the farther end, where he now stood, his forehead flattened against the bars, and his eyes straining out towards the moonlight, which alone illumined the bare and tiny chamber. Immediately on Sir Everard's right was a sloping wooden shelf, which he recognised at once to be the Franciscan's only couch, and just beyond it a prie-dieu, also of wood and unpainted, upon which stood a crucifix, and was laid a

breviary bound in long-thumbed vellum. Facing it, against the opposite wall, was one solitary chair, above which was nailed a copy of the Rules of St. Francis. Other furniture or trappings was there none.

"How divinely lovely!" the brother sighed aloud from the window.

As he spoke, the door closed. He turned suddenly, and his turning permitted the moonlight to fall full on Sir Everard's face as he stood perfectly still with his back to the door. The monk gave a sudden exclamation as of terror, made a dash at the crucifix, which he tightly grasped, and fell upon one knee, half as though appealing for protection to the sacred badge of Calvary, and half as if in deprecation to the intruder.

"You will not murder me, Delafosse!" he exclaimed. "They can hear me. Jesu! miserere!" And he kissed the feet of the figure on the cross. "I can make them hear me. You will not, will you—not with His divine image in my hands."

Delafosse thought that the cloister had either closed on or created a madman. He said as quietly and gently as he possibly

could, and without stirring from his position:

"I am not an assassin, Champion! What has filled your head with such strange fancies?"

"Laus tibi, Domine!" he murmured, again kissing the crucifix, but this time on the wound which his Lord had suffered in the side, and slowly rose to his feet, still retaining hold, as with superstitious clutch, of the carven image of the Great Beneficent Sorrow. "I could not help it, Delafosse! I could not help it." And his eye, wilder than ever, tried to wander away round the cell from his who seemed to scrutinise him so. But the cell was so small, that his gaze was forced to return. "I could not help it. It was my ambition, my weak, worthless, worldly, ambition. But God has humbled me, has chastised me, has led me here. You too will pity me, will you not? At least, you have not come to punish. Soften him, dear Lord, for thy passion's sake! She is safe, she is quite safe! I swear it."

Though the latter words and gestures had not been marked by the wildness of the first,

Delafosse could not yet persuade himself that he was not talking to a maniac.

"But why did you not remain with her, instead of coming here?"

"Pity me, pardon me!" he exclaimed. "How could I? How could I? Have you—you—have you seen her?"

"Never, since I saw you together."

"Where, where?" he asked excitedly, "where did you see us together?"

"Just behind old Hannah's cottage. Did you not guess that I had discovered the intimacy between you, which both had endeavoured to conceal?"

The light was on Sir Everard's face and not on Champion's; and, had it been otherwise, it probably was not strong enough to enable the former to mark very closely mere changes, however striking, of physiognomy, even if there were such, and he had been prepared to look for them. But in the clear white cell which darker made the tall dark figure facing him, he could not fail to notice a sudden alteration both of attitude and voice and gesture. Champion replaced the crucifix on the prie-dieu, though not

without another salutation, stood comparatively quiet, and began to talk in the tone and language of a man restored to sanity. But this, Delafosse, judging by his recent demeanour, naturally feared was but a lucid interval in a madness creeping upon him if not already established.

"You saw us there together, then?" he asked, "and that was why you left The Hold so suddenly?"

"It was," Sir Everard answered, indifferent at making the confession now and in such a place. "I had tried to be kind to her, and I was mortified that she should deceive me: to what little purpose is shown by your presence here. Heaven knows I did not love her, and had never pretended to do so; but she had pained and troubled me, at the very moment that I had resolved we must separate, by all but a verbal avowal that she loved me; and then immediately after——"

"But she *did* love you, Delafosse! loved you wildly well." As distinctly as though he had been in the woods of Batterton, instead of in that monk's cell on the lonely

Apennine peak, Sir Everard at that moment felt himself halt in the saddle, and saw the two figures of Champion and Rosie cross his path, their hands linked and their arms intertwined.

"But she loved *you* also! Were you already married to her then? Or were you still only her lover? And why have you deserted her?"

"Neither her husband nor her lover," he answered. "I was, as I am still, her half-brother."

It was Sir Everard's turn to utter an exclamation, if not of dread, of complete surprise. Such a supposition had, neither at the moment nor at any time since, ever entered his head. How should it have done so, when, even now that he knew it from Champion's own lips to be the fact, he was completely at a loss thereby to account for their striving to conceal from him as much as that they knew each other? What earthly motive could either he or she have had for hiding so simple a relationship?

"Her half-brother!" he exclaimed. "Then, in Heaven's name, why so much mystery?

You were not really estranged, or I should never have seen you together, and together so fondly. And if you were not estranged, why should either, or both indeed, be at such pains to screen from me so natural an intimacy? I always tried to be kind to you, Champion—did I not?"

"Yes, Delafosse, always, always."

"Just as I tried to be kind to her. And yet neither, it appears, trusted, and both deceived me."

Again he clutched at the crucifix, and the old wild way returned.

"Deceived you! How deceived you? Speak—speak! You do not mean——"

"Deceived me, at first intentionally by making me suppose that you were strangers, and at last unintentionally, but through equal disingenuousness, by making me imagine that you were either married or betrothed."

Champion had again recovered his calmness.

"Oh, that was all," he said, "was it?"

"Plenty, surely!" answered Delafosse, indignant before he could check himself. He checked himself though, immediately; fear-

ing, if he manifested the slightest anger, that his cowled companion's wild mad manner, now again subdued, might be provoked by alarm into once more returning. "I am not angry, Champion; I am only astonished and curious, and should like to know your motive or hers, if it will not pain or excite you to tell me."

"It is a long story," the other answered, with the tone and manner of as sane a person as ever spoke words, and began walking up and down the cell just as Delafosse had so often seen him walk up and down The Hold. He seemed to be striving to collect his thoughts as he did so, but with all trace of flightiness departed. "A long story, though perhaps very soon told; and I dare say you will scarcely understand it. *Deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles*," he added, quoting in a tone of conventional pietistic humility from the Latin psalms which he must now so often have had to recite. "He hath exalted the humble. Rosie has succeeded, and I—am here!"

Though of course he was not a priest, for there had not been time for such a trans-

formation to take place since Delafosse had last seen him, there was about him a striking sacerdotal air and manner. He looked every inch a monk, even as to the habit born; and he spoke now with all that apparent caution and frequent recourse to the words of their breviary, which no experienced man can have failed to note in the discourse of most of the ecclesiastical members of the Roman Catholic Church.

"He deposes the proud from their seat," he went on, "and He hath deposed me. I was born and bred in the bosom of the Church, poor in worldly means, but favoured with the possession of the faith. I was even marked out for the sacred ministry, and went through most of the training to which those are submitted who are chosen for the altar." What a flood of light was thrown upon past conversations by this avowal, quite new to Sir Everard. "But I lost grace, lost the grace of God, Delafosse, through pride, Lucifer's sin or worse even, the pride of intellect. *Dispersit superbos;* He scatters the proud; and how has He scattered my ambitious dreams! I wanted

to be great, to be renowned. As if the Catholic Church did not offer room enough for all true grandeur! But I believe again now." And he crossed himself. "O Lord! help thou my unbelief! Perhaps I never did more than doubt, deceived myself into imagining that I doubted; but to doubt is to lose grace. *Humiliasti me Domine! humiliasti me.* Verily Thou hast humbled me! *Vermis sum et non homo;* I am a worm and no man. Naked I came into the world, naked must I leave it."

This might be very strange, Sir Everard thought, but it was no madness, this part of it, unless all religious exaltations and depressions are to be considered such. Well acquainted with the singular spiritual manifestations which history records and human nature has not yet ceased to offer to our marvel, he listened to a confession which had become more easily intelligible now that he knew the penitent to have been born within the pale of the Church whose religious habit he here in self-abasement wore.

"A worm, a miserable worm, and I

panted to be a god. Not only did I yearn for poor, mean, worthless distinction, but I struggled for it, slaved for it, intrigued for it. But, *nisi Dominus edificaverit domum*, unless the Lord shall build the house, in vain they labour that build it; and I built and built in vain."

The rank egotism of the man, even in his new way of looking at things, forcibly struck Sir Everard. He had never once mentioned Rosie, though only by mentioning her could he satisfy the question which had been put to him. Of this Delafosse quietly reminded him.

"Ha! Rosie? Yes. *She* was not born in the faith. Her father was a Protestant, and her mother and mine died shortly after her birth. She has not lost grace, she had none to lose, and she has succeeded—in her miserable way. But I—I lost it and failed, and by my failure God has opened my eyes and led me to recover His grace and end my days within the fold. *Esurientes implevit bonis;* He filleth the hungry with good things, and He has given me the only good, to die in His courts. O what madness! to

want to be known and foremost in a vile material age which has no faith and craves only after the things of the earth!"

"But why was I not to know," Delafosse again inquiringly suggested, "that you and Rosie were related?"

"I was ashamed of her, and thought she would stand in my way," he answered.

"Then why did you seek her at Batterton?"

"Because I wanted her then, and needed her assistance."

"What for?"

The moon was still above the horizon, but her rays no longer shone through the iron bars. Instead, was the first pale bluish intimation of awakening dawn, and Delafosse could now begin to see distinctly the features of his companion. As he thus abruptly asked the question, "What for?" he noticed that a furtive glance shot from Champion's eyes and a look of pallor overspread his face, as he hurriedly replied:

"To help me publish my book. Only for that—only for that. I had no money to

defray the expense, as you know; and she had often offered it to me, and I refused. That was all."

The furtive glances still continued, and ceased only when Delafosse merely remarked quietly:

"*I* would have given it to you if you had asked me. Your book did not succeed, then?"

"How should it succeed in such an age?" The man was just as proud and vain-glorious as ever, however humble the monk might be. "But God willed that it should not succeed, and has opened my eyes, and led me out of the valley of the shadow of death. I have done with the world, its pomps, and its vanities. They are worthless, Delafosse, worse than worthless. There is only one real world, and that is the other. How to reach it, is the only wisdom. *Initium sapientiæ timor Domini.* The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. If we can but get *there! Domine, non sum dignus*, I am not worthy, O Lord!" And again he clasped the crucifix. "But Thou

didst die for us all, that we might be saved. Save me, dear Lord! Let not Thy precious blood be shed in vain!"

"But was that the only reason for your seeking out your sister?"

The uneasy furtive look returned to him.

"What makes you think there was any other?"

He seemed to wait with painful anxiety for the answer.

"Because I should have thought she would not have been so very ready to receive and help you, after your treatment of her, unless she too had something to gain. Or if she had not, why should *she* hide from me her relationship to you, however anxious *you* might be to do so?"

"She *had* something to gain. I tell you she really loved you, and probably imagined you would be more likely to—well, yes—to marry her, if you knew nothing about her. But quite apart from that, she always did as I wished."

"Do you know where she is?"

"No. She has plenty of money. What can she want with *me?*"

Not a word of tenderness, of affection, of interest, for the girl, the half-sister who, even according to his own account, had always done as he wished her to do, and whose last act had been to give him the money wherewith to gratify the one ambition of his life, to bring out his confused and ill-arranged literary production, which he had fancied would bring him fame! Not a syllable of kindness for her! All that he found to say of her was contained in the brutal confession that she, his sister, had wildly loved a man who did not love her at all. Delafosse, affectionate as he was, had never been able to feel anything like affection for this man; sometimes, indeed, he scarcely liked him. But now for the first time, looking on him, he loathed him. Why should he remain longer? There was nothing more, it seemed, to be learned. He had solved the riddle of Rosie's behaviour; and so far it had been solved in her favour, but dead against this heartless egotist, who fancied that a rusty brown serge habit could cover a multitude of sins which it had never occurred to him might be expiated by charity!

"And you intend to remain here?"

"Yes: for ever. *Vigilate et orate*, watch and pray; that is quite enough. But how did you know that I was here?"

"I saw you when you came out of the subterranean chapel in the procession, recognised you at once, and followed you to the cell."

"You did not come here on purpose, then?"

"To see *you?* Of course not. I had not the least idea that you were here. I am travelling with Montagu Narracott."

A few more indifferent words passed, and the monk let him noiselessly out into the corridor, in which one dim oil lamp still burned, but in which there was already some faint earnest of the morning. Noiselessly again he closed it, and gave a long breath as of infinite relief.

"I thought he had come to murder me; and with these thick walls, nobody would have heard my cries. He does not know yet. Where is one safe? If I fly to the hill-tops, Thou art there, O Lord! But

Thou hast saved me now, and wilt save me again!"

He flung himself on his knees by the prie-dieu, he clasped the crucifix, he kissed it, he prayed aloud, he wept, he grovelled on the floor, he vowed again that he was a worm and no man, he sank to the very depths of self-abasement. Then he slowly rose, laid him on the sloping wooden shelf, and with no other pillow but his arm, and no other covering but his Franciscan habit, dropped off into immediate slumber.

CHAPTER IX.

BACK TO FLORENCE.

All was silent throughout the monastery, as Sir Everard crept back to the chamber in an inner recess of which he could hear Montagu Narracott soundly sleeping. He himself got into bed in the other recess, but he was chill and hungry, and could not fall off to rest. To think of it! that such restless ambition should terminate in those dull, solitary, snow-surrounded heights; that an insatiable student should end his days where not a book, save a breviary, was to be seen; that a man who had thought to electrify the world with his wisdom and his wit, and who, if deficient in the higher properties of

these, withal was a man of considerable learning and superior parts, should close his career among a set of people who wanted to know if England was not near America! The wonder of it!

But not only that. Delafosse had known him as not only a fiercely aspiring man, burning to be and to be thought somebody, but a man who, even if he had no fine critical faculty of his own, could be made to see, and apparently to enjoy, the ridiculous inconsistencies which some extreme minds are still pleased to decorate with the euphemistic title of mysteries of Faith. He had never hinted at his being a Roman Catholic, and had certainly always created the impression that differences of creeds were very unimportant matters. But now, not only had he laid aside all worldly wants, but he apparently laid the very strongest stress on the value of grace and of being within the bosom of the Church. Nor were even these enough. The cell, the vigil, the fast, the wooden bed, the coarse dress, the prostration of the body—these alone had seemed to satisfy the reaction of his mind.

Yet, after all, was it wonderful? He had long been the slave of a foul ambition, but never the lord of an honourable one. He had wanted to be great, not to be useful; to glorify himself, not to benefit his species. He had failed, failed miserably, in his contemptible pursuit, and then — not before, not before his failure—he had turned round, in his weak, impotent way, on the world which did not want and would not have him, and appealed to that other world which was Heaven to him now, merely because it alone now offered any hopes to his metamorphosed, but in reality identical, selfishness and rank ineradicable egotism. He was bitterly disappointed, and he deemed his disappointment religion, because it vented itself in spiritual formulas instead of in curses. Avowals of terrible unworthiness, borrowed from other lips, having no special exclusive reference to himself, but involving the whole human species (including those, of course, who had not, like himself, failed, and, therefore, had no reason for a vague, fantastic repentance), issued in profusion from his mouth; but they must

have been rather consoling than otherwise, and necessarily flattered rather than mortified the self-love which, clear as the day, was still the man's monster master-passion.

"*Vermis sum et non homo*," Delafosse mused aloud as he lay on his back: "I am a worm and no man, Champion said, selecting a phrase from the copious despondency of Eastern phraseology. *Homo sum*, says a brave old Pagan, and for once the Pagan is the better philosopher. A fellow who begins by thinking himself a demi-god is as likely as not to end by thinking himself and all his species worms. A mind that has oscillated ever so much in excess on one side, will be pretty sure to oscillate as much in excess on the other. It may, perhaps, be blasphemy against our Maker to imagine ourselves demi-gods; but it is at least equally such to proclaim ourselves worms. We happen to be neither, but, as the sound Pagan says, men; and we should never allow ourselves to be alienated from our own kind. *Cucullus non facit monacum*, to quote a little of their own mediæval Latin. The cowl does not make the monk. And

though, in other days, and in other circumstances, it may have covered not only lowly but truly humble heads, in this instance it is only screening a head, as vain as ever, from the public pillory due to its own conceit and failure."

And Rosie, poor little Rosie! How badly she must have thought that he had treated her. She had no right to deceive him, it is true; but she had not deceived him at all, in the manner in which he had all this time been supposing that she had deceived him. She had acted partly out of deference to that fellow's selfishness. And even if it were true—and, perhaps, it was not—that a portion of her motive was, as Champion asserted, her belief that she would so more easily win him for a husband, it was not a very praiseworthy motive certainly; but, considering that she really loved him, it was not one that he could harshly condemn. On the whole, he was obliged to come to the conclusion that, without intending to do so, he had treated poor little Rosie very badly indeed, and he was exceedingly sorry for it. Where was she? he wondered.

And did she still love him "wildly well"? He should certainly like to see her, and explain to her the reason for his abrupt departure from The Hold without a single civil word of farewell. Besides, he should be able to give her news of Ambrose. What a talk they would have when they met! It would be all explanation, would it not?

Thus musing, he at last fell asleep, but not for long; for Antonio was routing them out of bed, and assuring them that they must soon be in the saddle if they meant to reach Bibbiena by noon, and there take carriage to Pontassieve, so as to catch the last train from that place to Florence.

"Is it absolutely necessary?" asked Narracott.

"Yes, old boy, it is. I promised the Marquise de Bonnefoi that I would be at the dress rehearsal to-night, and I must."

"All right. Here comes the coffee, though there *is* no milk." And they commenced a hearty breakfast, three or four curious old monks standing by the while. "It's my opinion," continued Montagu, "they're deuced sorry to lose us. They regard us as

the country cousin regards his accomplished metropolitan relative, when that condescending gentleman deigns to visit the provinces. Ever regularly snowed-up, old fellow, in these parts?"

"*Cosa dice?* What does he say?" asked the rubicund old friar to whom Montagu's English question had appeared to be addressed.

Delafosse repeated the question in less familiar but more intelligible language.

"Snowed-up! Constantly. One year nobody could get to the monastery, and the community was starving, and thought that the last moment had come for all of them. But they prayed to Saint Francis, and just when their fears were beginning to be greater than their faith, the bell at the gate rang — as it rings now," he said. Oddly enough, at that moment it did so. "They knew that nobody could reach the sanctuary, for there was no road, nothing but snow, all snow, deep, deep. They went to the gate, opened it, and there stood a large pannier of bread, white bread, beautiful bread, but

nobody there. Our father Saint Francis had sent it."

"Did you see all this?" asked Delafosse.

"No, it was before my time, before any of our times. But in my time, nine years ago only, we were reduced to beans, and had nothing else either for ourselves or the peasants. We doled out the beans, fearing every moment to dole out the last. But the bin never got more empty, however many ladlefuls we took out, till the trouble was over and other food arrived. Ecco!"

All the others nodded their heads and said "Ecco!" likewise. There could be no doubt about that story. And having told it to Narracott, who said something about "beans" being a novel but very excellent rhyme for "marines," and repaid the good Franciscans' hospitality with gracious words and a twenty-lire piece, Sir Everard mounted his rough but ready steed, and was soon descending the mountain with his friend by his side.

"Who do you think was in that cell I entered last night?"

"Haven't the remotest idea. It was the rummest move on your part I ever saw you up to. I thought that the *flebile* had fetched you so, that you had made a shot at the most tolerant-looking coon of the lot, had gone in and made a clean breast of all your sins and enormities to him (you might well be such a mighty long time about it; I sat up ever so long for you), had taken the habit and forsworn water, and would never be heard of more. Now, am I not a well-bred man? Could even a Choctaw Indian beat me at concealing my feelings? I have been dying with curiosity to know what the deuce took you there, and have never asked you a question."

"It was Ambrose Champion!"

"What was Ambrose Champion?"

"The monk whom I followed into his cell."

"That's a 'metamorphosis of morals' with a vengeance," said Narracott with an air of surprise, but unable at that as at any other moment to go without his joke.

"It is a wonderful instance of the doctrine which he clumsily attempted to demon-

strate in his book, as you would see if you had read it and he had expressed it more clearly."

"Thanks, old fellow! But I don't mind taking your word for that much; I'd rather not read his book if it's all the same to you. But how did you spot him?"

"I recognised him as he came out of the underground chapel, when we were standing on either side the door, making room for them to come out."

"Had he recognised you?"

"No, and he seemed immensely astonished when he turned round and saw me in his cell."

"Well, it wasn't the likeliest thing in the world."

"I thought, at first, he was stark staring mad."

"*I* think so now, for that matter; or what has he stuck himself up there for? Mad as a monk, sir! three to one on that."

"He gave a sort of shriek, seized a crucifix, and asked if I was going to murder him."

Delafosse went on to tell Narracott, as

faithfully as possible, all that had passed between them, though he was necessarily unable to represent the monk's singular manner and pietistic demeanour, or to repeat with accuracy a conversation so vagrant and so interlarded with scraps from the only literature which Champion now thought worthy of cultivation. The only impression made upon Narracott's mind was of a foolish hopeless lunatic; quite as mad when he quoted the psalms, or gave evidence against his own half-sister, as when he wanted to know if Delafosse intended to murder him. Narracott was not a good hand at making fine distinctions or at analysis of any kind. He himself was a sane honest man, and he knew a good many men whom he considered to be neither; but he knew nothing of that debatable land in which men once honest are not yet rogues, and men once in their senses are not yet entire maniacs.

"I do not quite agree with you," said Sir Everard, with his wonted moderation. "There are three sorts of people now-a-days. Those who do not think at all——"

"A large number, that sort, I should say."

"You are one of them, Montagu," said Delafosse, laughing, but thoroughly meaning what he said. "You are called the practical people, and pride yourselves upon your title."

"Perhaps we do, and it is not a bad one."

"You are very good hands," continued Delafosse, "at taking the right road when you see it; but utterly at a loss how to find it, if it does not happen to be visible. However, you rarely, if ever, take the wrong one."

"That's a consolation, at any rate."

"A very great one, and I admire the practical people accordingly."

"The practical people, through me their spokesman, consider that a handsome speech, and thank you," said Narracott, doffing low his wide-awake. "Who are the other two sorts?"

"Those who do think, but the one scientifically, the others unscientifically. The first find out the right road for you when you, the first sort, are at a loss."

"We are obliged to them."

"The second cannot find it for themselves, and will not have it found for them, and so take the wrong one."

"The practical man has the pull of that sort then?"

"Unquestionably, and a very great pull. In a scientific and positive age like this, to be thinking theologically or metaphysically is so complete a blunder and so entirely beside the mark, that the man who persists in doing so is infinitely worse off than the man who does not think at all. To know how men used to think in other times is valuable and indeed necessary; but to think as they thought is to make oneself what they were not, an anachronism. Ambrose Champion is a wonderful instance of this. In the nineteenth century, he knew as much about science as a baby, but really as much about metaphysics as Thomas Aquinas, the learned doctor, himself. The consequence is, that he always talked nonsense, learnëd nonsense, but nonsense all the same. And it is not at all wonderful that at last he has acted it."

"Very neat, though a little abstruse, for a poor practical man like me," said Montagu, with his irrepressible humour; "and I am only sorry you have not a larger audience. I fear Antonio did not catch it all; and this, my sober steed, though he does know the right road, and takes it too, when it seems to me there is a mighty lot of wrong ones, is not, perhaps, quite so scientific as he seems. But you have had your little oration; now, hear mine. A fellow who thinks that he is going to startle the nineteenth century by a book with such a title as the 'Metamorphoses of Morals,' is mad; and the fellow who, having failed in doing so, bids adieu to soap, and does 'flebile' every day of his life afterwards, at two o'clock in the morning, is still madder. And if you'll only put that into equally straightforward Italian, and tell it to Antonio, I don't mind betting that he'll understand it and agree with it too."

"But why did he think that I had gone there to murder him?"

"Because he is mad, I repeat. My theory will meet all the questions you can possibly

ask. I suppose I may tell Countess the whole story? She will be immensely amused, especially about Rosie Raffles. You sly dog, you! never to have told us a word about that before. We suspected all sorts of wicked things."

"Poor Rosie!" said Sir Everard, simply. "I should like to see her again now. When do you want to leave Florence?"

"The day after to-morow," answered Narracott, "unless you wish to stay longer. But why should you come with us at all? I know you like Florence vastly. You stay there. We can travel about alone well enough."

"No," said Delafosse; "I will go with you. The day after to-morrow be it then, if you like."

And so it was agreed.

CHAPTER X.

A CHALLENGE.

The last train left Pontassieve about six, and they were, therefore, in Florence at a comparatively early hour. They parted at the station, Delafosse going straight to his rooms, Narracott to his hotel. The latter was affectionately received by Countess, who was delighted to have him back, but was loud in her praises of the kindness and attention of Mr. Pomeroy.

"That's all right. But *I've* got the most to tell this time. I think I shall astonish you." And he told her the whole story about Champion just as he had heard it from his friend's lips.

She listened with the deepest interest and attention, but interrupted him at the very parts which he thought the least important and about which he could give her, when she cross-questioned him, the least satisfactory information. She was especially curious to know more about Champion's manner when Sir Everard had first entered the cell; and about his dread that Sir Everard had come to murder him. Montagu could only repeat the words just as they were told to him, and say, as he had said to Delafosse, that the man was stark staring mad, and was no doubt continually imagining all sorts of similar horrors with just as little foundation for his insane fear.

"Oh, I see you know nothing about it, you dear old stupid," she said, with affectionate contempt for his capacity for carrying a story. "I must see Sir Everard himself, and have it all over again from him. Is he coming to-night?"

"No; he has to go to some dress rehearsal or other, to meet some Marquise de something."

Women flatter themselves that their wits

are considerably sharper than men's, in matters where there has been any double-dealing, or where some excellent person is endeavouring to spring a mine. I am inclined to question this arrogated supremacy, and to concede its existence only in those cases where their personal likes and dislikes come into play. And I am further tempted to believe that, whether what was at that moment passing in Countess's brain, and which she immediately after gave expression to, was a just surmise or not, it was due rather to her special prejudice against Rosie Raffles than to any general feminine shrewdness.

"Well, you are a stupid lot, you men."

"*Connu.* But why the compliment upon this occasion?"

"Did Sir Everard express no suspicion?"

"Of whom—of what?"

"Why, that Rosie Raffles and Ambrose Champion had something to do with Lily Swetenham's flight from home!"

"You don't think that!" exclaimed Montagu, with open mouth.

"But I do. And if you will give me

my choice of all the carrings on the Ponte Vecchio if I am right, you shall call me an old idiot till the end of my life if I am wrong."

"Rather a one-sided bargain that, uncommonly like 'heads, I win—tails, you lose.' However, agreed."

"Why was he so afraid when he first saw Sir Everard, and so comparatively quiet and sensible afterwards?"

"Sensible indeed!"

"Yes, sensible: sensible enough to talk and tell a continuous story, and tell it better, I will be bound, than you have told it to me. It is all very well to call a man mad because he becomes a monk; but I can quite understand people getting away from the bother of life, and burying themselves in monasteries. I have felt as if I could do it scores of times."

"Then I shall begin calling you an old idiot at once."

"Very well; but you will not be able to do so when I have got my earrings. You may laugh as you like; but we have at last got the key, or the key of the key, to Lily's

disappearance, however much you and Sir Everard—superior beings, forsooth!—may have missed seeing it."

Delafosse, meanwhile, had had a cold bath—luxury, or rather necessity, denied him in the monasteries—had dressed himself, found that he had a good half-hour to spare before going to the rehearsal, and hurried off to Mrs. Vanari's.

She, however, was not at home, neither was Leonilda. But Regina was, and soon came to greet him.

"The first time I have ever known your mamma to be out."

"She and Hilda have gone over to cousin Mildred's. They did not expect you; you never come to see us now."

"I have been away three or four days."

"But before that?"

"I had to attend to my friends the Narracotts."

Sir Everard saw that the dear little girl was deeply hurt at his absence and neglect, and this only confirmed him in a resolve almost decided on before he had now again seen her. This was, moreover, an excellent

opportunity for doing what he intended to do, for she was alone.

It was this: to tell her the one great sorrow in his breast, the sad story about Lily. He hoped and believed that he had not touched Regina's heart. Still he knew that some slight feeling of mortification must needs be stirred in the bosom of a young girl who likes a man very much—as she certainly liked him—if he never manifests for her more than friendly affection in return, although he be perfectly unfettered, and therefore free to do so. More than friendly affection he had never displayed and never should display; and he was leaving her, and she would ever afterwards have and hide the little wound arising from the thought that he might have loved her and had not done so. But if he told her that he was not free and that all his love had been given long before he knew her, the danger of her feeling hurt in the after-days, when he was gone, would be removed, and she would be able to think of him as a dear kind friend who had given her all that he had to give, with which, in that case, she would be wholly happy and

content. I think it was a delicate and refined feeling. I know it was an honest one.

"I am very glad to find you alone," he said, as they strolled into the garden, "because, my little sister, I want to tell you a long sad story about myself."

"Oh! how I wish I was your sister!" she exclaimed. "You are *so* good."

"You *shall* be, dear; but listen to me."

Up and down, up and down, under the feathery trees—with the sweet, silent roses on either hand and ever and anon poaching on the pathway—they walked side by side; he telling, she hearkening to, the melancholy tale. At last it came to a close.

"I loved her from my heart, my dear little sister, and I love her from it still. If I have been quiet, and even stupid and sad sometimes, when you have always been sweet to me and cheery, that is why! I have lost her, but she is still the vast necessity of my life—its missing music—its silent chord—its unresponding soul."

The tender-hearted little creature was sobbing.

"Oh, if I could find her for you! I would

walk barefoot round the world to seek and bring her to you. I would do anything! I would die for you both—to make you both happy."

She knew for certain that she *was* his sister now; and, whatever Miss Williams might say, she sought rather than rebuffed his tender words and soothings, as, quite unchallenged, he put his fraternal arms around her, and kissed away her sympathetic tears.

"And to-morrow is the last night—is it?" she asked. "Must it be the last?"

"For the present, yes. But I shall often be in Florence, Regina dear, as long as you are in it."

"But you will spend the last night with us—will you not?"

"Of course I will."

"And come early?"

"Yes."

"And stay late?"

"Yes."

"See! the moon is rising. We shall have her again to-morrow night, shall we not?"

"Yes; just a little later. But what time is it?"

As he spoke, the clock of the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio boomed out the hour of nine over the beautiful city, and he was forced to leave her, and hurry away to the dress rehearsal. It was to be held in the Sala Filarmonica, where the representation was also to be; for, though the performers were to be amateurs, it was for a public object. None but the actors and actresses concerned, and their private friends, admitted by voucher, would be there to-night. Sir Everard had one from the Marquise de Bonnefoi, the card which she gave him the last time we saw them together at the ball.

He was naturally anxious about the evening's proceedings, and the opportunities which they might give him. He felt sure that Vanari would manage to be there, if only on account of the Marquise, and he would do all in his power to-night to convince the infatuated fool that she did not care one straw for him. If he failed in doing this, he would probably fail altogether, for the day after to-morrow he must leave

Florence, and the game in the lady's hands.

Everything went as well as he could possibly desire. Whenever the Marquise was not on the stage, she was at his side, parading her conquest before the chief Florentine notabilities. Delafosse, on his part, did his best to second the delusion. He fetched and carried, and held, and picked up, and handed, and waited, with all the dexterous devotion of a long professed *cavalier' servente*. Vanari was there, but sulked aloof in dark purple rage till the close of the rehearsal, when he approached the Marquise and inquired, without noticing Sir Everard, if he could see to getting her carriage.

"It is not here to-night. My horses are lame."

"Can I take you home in mine, Marquise?" Delafosse said quietly, but aloud, so as to be heard by the other.

"A thousand thanks!" she exclaimed. "You are so kind; I shall be charmed to accept your offer."

He arranged her cloak (she was still in costume), gave her his arm, and conducted

her down the steps amid the eyes and smiles of the "*gente beffarda*"—those incorrigible Florentine wags. Just as they had reached the bottom of the staircase, and he was giving an order to a man to get him a carriage, Vanari entered from the street, and approached.

"That is my carriage at the door, Madame, if you will accept it. They are very difficult to get."

Delafosse saw that it was a carriage hired in the street; but then the one that he had to offer would have been precisely similar. Before he had time to say a word, the Marquise pressed his arm, and said:

"We had better get into it. Come along!" And she almost drew him with her, till he felt that if he did not follow she would let slip his arm, and get into the carriage without him. This would never do. It would be victory for Vanari, and complete ruin to his own scheme. In a moment more, the door of the carriage was open, the Marquise seated within, himself ensconced at her side, Vanari sitting opposite them, and the carriage rattling over the hard, stony pavement.

Sir Everard, hiding all annoyance, talked playfully and familiarly to the Marquise, who prattled back with affectionate vivacity. Vanari sat silent and solemn, uttering not a word, till the carriage drew up at her door.

They descended, and Sir Everard hastily slipped two lire into the driver's hand.

"It's after midnight, signor."

"Is it? There's another lira, then."

"What are you doing?" asked Vanari. "I pay for this carriage."

"Certainly not. I thank you for calling a carriage; but I have the honour of escorting Madame la Marquise, and the carriage is therefore mine, and I have paid for it, and mine, therefore, it must remain."

The tall liveried footman had appeared from within; but Madame la Marquise still stood by, watching, with haughty interest, the altercation.

"If it was your carriage," said Vanari—"why, then, had you not the politeness to offer me the seat, instead of taking it yourself, and leaving me to get in after you?"

Sir Everard shrugged his shoulders.

"No, signor, I am not your lacquey, as

you try to make me out. You have insulted, and will give me satisfaction."

For a moment she looked over her shoulder at Delafosse with a triumphant smile, as significantly as if she had orally said: "I think I have beaten you this time, Sir Everard!" then added aloud: "This is scarcely a scene for me, gentlemen!" — gathered her cloak over her voluptuous bust, and swept scornfully into her palace.

CHAPTER XI.

"SISTER MINE."

Leonilda and Regina Benvenuto were sitting together the following morning and together bewailing the fate which had decided that its evening would be the last which their dear friend Sir Everard would spend with them for some time to come, when in burst Destrier with even more than his usual wildness of manner and impetuosity of speech.

"The scoundrel! What do you think? The Signor says I shall never set foot in his house again as long as I live, and swears that you, Hilda, shall never step out across

its threshold until you have promised that you will never think of marrying me."

"And why? And why?" they both asked in a breath.

"Because I refuse to be his second in a duel."

"With whom?"

"With Sir Everard Delafosse."

"Sir Everard Delafosse!" they both exclaimed, Regina leaping from her chair, and looking as if she would rush off that very moment and separate the combatants.

"He says that the most likely man to be his second is the man who aspires to marry his daughter."

"I am not his daughter!" said dear simple honest Hilda, firing up and blushing with indignation, and then adding with delicious logic: "And I certainly am not going to marry you at all, I can tell you, if Sir Everard is to be shot."

"What will he do, now that you have refused?"

"Get another second."

"Where is mamma? I must tell her at once: *she* can prevent it."

At that moment Mrs. Vanari entered, and was there and then informed of what she was only too prepared to hear. She alone of the four knew how Sir Everard had drawn the challenge upon himself by his chivalrous regard for her happiness; and in order to satisfy them how powerless she would be, as far as her husband was concerned, to prevent the encounter, she was forced on the spur of the moment to tell them as much of Sir Everard's motives and her own troubles as she well could.

"And he has done it for you, mamma dear?" said Regina. "Oh, he is—I don't know what he is! He is———But it must not be, it must not take place. I will prevent it; I am determined I will prevent it."

Determination is all very well, but ingenuity is often still better. And though on this occasion they were all agreed that the duel must be prevented, none of them saw or said how it was to be prevented. At last Regina went and put on her hat, saying that she was going over to see her friend Miss Williams.

Regina, though in her heart expecting to

meet with but little sympathy from her friend, who, she imagined, would consider her anxiety about the challenge only a fresh proof of her unwise feeling for Sir Everard, blurted out what was uppermost in her thoughts the very moment she entered. To her amaze, her friend turned statue-pale, and then rose into a state of miserable excitement, very much greater than her own. She had no words of reproof or accusation for the man whose name she had never before heard save with manifest prejudice; she displayed only a sudden, feverish, irrepressible fear mingled with resolve, which, like Regina's own, had not yet invented means for turning will into way. At length she stopped suddenly and said:

"I know what I will do, Regina! I will go to the Marquise de Bonnefoi myself, and implore of her to stop it."

They little supposed that the Marquise already knew all, and far more than, they knew. Regina clapped her hands.

"Oh! what a good idea of yours! Of course she will not let them fight. Fancy a woman allowing men to try to injure each

other for her supposed benefit! No woman would do it."

So Regina, simple soul, believed. The other probably was not quite so credulous, but she put on her things, and declared her intention of seeking the Marquise at once.

"Do be quick back! I will remain here till you return, and I shall be miserable till you do. Destrier said that it could not take place before to-morrow, and you will be in plenty of time to prevent it. But do be quick, do be quick, won't you?"

Away the pale-faced, slim, silent, neatly-dressed figure went, gliding noiselessly through the hot, quiet, deserted streets of the early June afternoon. She seemed too much bent upon her errand to take even the shady side of the way, when the sunny side was the shortest. Her only idea evidently was to get to some place as rapidly as possible.

She arrived at the Palazzo. The tall footman came out and stared at her, and would have liked to be impertinent, but dared not.

"I want to see Madame la Marquise."

"It is early, signorina. I am not sure that she will yet be visible."

"I *must* see her."

"They will tell you up-stairs, then." And he pointed with his long staff to the marble flight.

She mounted as hastily as she had come along the streets, and rang at the crimson coloured bell-rope. She rang again, for she thought the servant was terribly long in coming. The second ring seemed to have hurried him, for he approached—she could see him through the glass door—putting his second arm through the remaining coat-sleeve.

"I want particularly to see Madame la Marquise," she said, inspired by her great desire with the simplest and sincerest, and therefore the best, words under the circumstances.

"I am not quite sure of——"

At that moment, the Marquise passed across an inner room whose door was open, and saw who was the visitor.

"Is it you, Miss Williams? Come in,

come in." And they were alone. "You are a little early, but I am dressed, and we will go into the drawing-room. There are pretty things that will please you, and I will show you where I have hung your water-colours."

There was a doorway, but no door, between the ante-room from which they were passing, and the drawing-room which they now had entered. But a heavy curtain hung across, and was again let fall by the servant when they were beyond it.

"I fear I cannot buy any more just at present; though, if you have brought any with you, I shall be very happy to look at them."

The Marquise was good natured enough to be willing to be amused by anybody, when nobody more amusing or important was not by.

"Oh, but, madame, it is not that about which I have come. I have come about something more serious!"

"Do not suppose that I am rich. I have the tenderest heart, but I am quite incapacitated at the present moment from assisting anybody."

The visitor restrained whatever annoyance she might feel at the supposition that she was a mendicant.

"But it is not money, or anything to do with money, that I so much wished to see you for. It is a duel."

"A duel! Indeed. Men are always doing those absurd things about one. Between whom, pray? For the thing is so common, and appears so often to be threatened, that I am at a loss to fix upon any fools in particular. Are they going to fight about *me?*"

"Yes, madame."

"And who may they be?"

"Sir Everard Delafosse and Signor Vanari."

"Do you know them?"

"I know Signor Vanari slightly," she answered, with composure; "and his step-daughter, Regina Benvenuto, I know most intimately, and love dearly. You saw her in my little studio when you were so kind as to call."

"I remember," she said, arranging the folds of her dress. "She is a pretty little

thing, but not distinguished-looking. I took her for a drive in the Cascine once, but really I could not take her again."

The other still mastered her feelings, save the one earnest desire to gain the point which had driven her there.

"But you will not let them fight, madame, I am sure, now that you know their intentions. You will prevent it — forbid it — make it impossible."

"What a foolish child you are!" the Marquise exclaimed, filling the room with merry, but withal painful, laughter. "What do you suppose I care whether men fight about me or not?"

As she spoke these words, the curtain was drawn slightly aside, and the figure of a man half appeared in the doorway. Instead of advancing, he lowered it again, but without entirely retiring, and held it as one does who would observe without being observed.

"But they will wound, perhaps kill, each other."

"Will they? Well, perhaps they will. Why not? Women are wounded, as well as killed, for *them* often enough."

"But do you hate them—either of them?"

"Not in the least; I am perfectly indifferent. What a simpleton you really are! Would you not like your lover to fight for you?—especially if you did not love him?"

"They love you, then!" the other exclaimed, for a moment forgetting her mission. "Which of them, madame?"

"Both, of course. The most ordinary thing in the world. Let us finish with this nonsense. I will show you a water-colour I once did, myself."

"But, Marquise, I beg—I implore——"

"What folly is this? I tell you plainly—what one would suppose a girl arrived at the use of reason would understand—that not only do I not object to their fighting—I like their fighting about me. It amuses me, and gives me and all the world so complete a proof of their amorous frenzy, that I can then throw them over, and accept the homage of a fresh batch of pretty blockheads waiting for their turn. They may run each other through and through, as far as I am concerned."

"May they, really?" said a voice at the

doorway, and the curtain fell as a background upon the full-length figure of Vanari. "Then I will take excellent care that they do not. In the interest of history, I will just inform this young lady that I am the first person in Florence into whose head it ever entered to peril anything for you, Marquise; and in the interest of prophecy, I will tell you, madame, that I shall be the last. I give you a week to leave it. Signorina! may I have the honour?"

He drew aside the curtain, and Miss Williams passed through, Vanari following at her heels, and vouchsafing a retiring bow to the Marquise, who said, scornfully:

"Cowards are never without excuses—especially when they are disappointed!" and disappeared through the door at the farther end of the apartment.

Regina was rushing up and down the little room—first opening the door and listening for footsteps on the staircase—then looking out of window—then rushing to the door again—doing everything, in fact, to make her friend's long absence seem longer. Though at that hour of the day few but

English visitors were abroad, many a figure turned the corner and many a footstep reached her ears before either announced the feverishly desired return. But at last it came.

"You have prevented it—you have prevented it — I can see that you have prevented it," exclaimed Regina.

"Heaven has prevented it, darling, not I. Let us thank God for it—for I completely failed. The Signor came in—I suppose he goes and comes there (or did go and come, for he will go there no more) just as he likes — came in just as she was not only refusing to interfere, but expressing her delight that he should fight a duel for her and her contemptuous indifference for him whether he did or not."

"And he heard her!"

"Heard her with his own ears. Nothing that ever I could have said would have convinced him, or you may be sure that she would not have said it even to me. Depend upon it that she is enormously mortified that the duel will not take place."

"What a monster!"

"But there is no danger, now. Oh! how relieved I feel!"

And she dropped into a chair.

"But was it not good of him!"

"Of whom?"

"Of Sir Everard."

"Good of him! Wicked of him, you mean. However glad I may have been to have saved him—both of them, I mean—it does not leave him any the less blamable in what must necessarily have been his conduct. You are surely satisfied now that I was not wrong in guarding you."

"Oh, but I have never told you!" exclaimed Regina. "I was so anxious about that foolish, detestable challenge—oh! I am so glad it is all over!—and you were in such a hurry to rush away to the Marquise, that I forgot to tell you the really important part."

"I do not see what there can be to tell, which you should or can know anything about."

"Do I not?" said Regina, triumphantly; and now, released from all anxiety, she

turned at once to teazing her friend with joyous playfulness. "What do you think Sir Everard did to me last night?"

"What?" asked the other, anxiously.

"Kissed me again."

"Again!"

"I promised I would tell you, and I am telling you now."

"Regina! Regina!" her companion almost wailed.

"Oh, you dear, jealous, blind, stupid creature! You do not know him at all, and I do. He exposed himself to everything disagreeable and to this nasty challenge all for mamma's sake; she told me so herself."

And Regina tried to explain what was a good deal more intelligible to her companion who listened, than to herself who repeated simply what little her mother had been forced to tell her.

"Don't you believe it?"

"Yes; I believe it. It is quite possible, and it agrees also with the way in which Signor Vanari spoke as we came away together from the Marquise. But, Regina— —"

"But nonsense. I will not listen to it. He kissed me, and he shall kiss me as often as ever he likes."

"Are you engaged to him?" asked the other, with pale face still paler, and earnestness terribly calm.

Regina, however, was too busy with the burden of her own story to notice the effect which it might produce upon her hearer. She laughed merrily.

"Engaged to him! I am his sister, his dear, sweet sister, and nothing else, and do not want to be, and I love him, and he loves me, and I would go round the world for him—that I would."

Then she grew more serious, serious almost as her friend, whom she came and stood quietly by now, as she went on:

"Poor fellow! You do not know what a sad history he has, and I never knew till last night, when he told it me."

"What did he tell you?" asked the other, eagerly, hungrily.

"I cannot remember all. But he loved and loves, and says that he shall always love, one girl, and one only—one whom he

has lost; who went away, whom he cannot find—who—no, he does not know whether she ever loved him or not. But he—— Oh! you should have heard how he spoke of her, how he worships her, how she is, he said, the missing music of his life, the I know not what—he spoke so beautifully. And then he told me I was his sister, and kissed me, and was so kind to me, because I was crying at all the sad story he had told me. And I was quite right, was I not? I *may* be his sister?"

"Yes—yes—Regina—but—but——"

"What is it, darling? You are ill—you are——"

"No—no—but tell me, Regina! what was—her—her—the name of the girl whom —whom he—loves!"

"Lily——"

But before the second name could be uttered, Regina caught a falling figure that slowly slipped in a heavy swoon, from her overburdened arms, to the ground.

CHAPTER XII.

AMONG THE NIGHTINGALES.

The last night had come. O sad last nights, when we waste the precious moments in counting them, and weakly implore them not to speed so fast, instead of turning them to account!

Delafosse was on his way to spend his last with the Florentine friends whose sorrow at his departure was perforce proportioned to the almost daily comfort which they had drawn from his stay. He was walking rapidly, and was just passing the Caffè Doney when he heard his name:

"Sir Everard! Sir Everard!"

It was the Marquise de Bonnefoi, eating

a tutti-frutti ice in her carriage on her way home from the Cascine. He stopped and bowed.

"So Signor Vanari and you have thought better of your rashness. There is to be no encounter, I hear?"

"You have heard rightly. Instead of a hostile messenger from Signor Vanari, I have had a note, praying excuse for what he calls his stupidity, and attributing his change of purpose to his discovery of your real sentiments towards him—indeed, towards both of us. How he made the discovery he does not say; but I am so well satisfied that he should at last know what I knew all along, that I am not curious as to the means by which he became enlightened."

"And you are satisfied with his excuse?"

"Perfectly." And he bowed.

"Men are easily satisfied," she said, with a curl of her insolent little lip, "when they want to save their skins."

"You are ungenerous," he answered, with a smile, "not to attribute our timidity rather to a jealous feeling for your reputation."

She ought to have known better than to

have entered into a wit combat with a man who had proved to her more than once that he was an accomplished hand at the difficult game of being courteously severe. But the cleverest woman is at the mercy of her temper, if she have one.

"Are you leaving Florence, then?"

"To-morrow," he answered.

"You are discreet. It requires much courage to remain in an Italian city after having shirked a duel—more even than to fight it."

He smiled again, and answered quietly:

"Why should I stay now? I fear, if I did, that I should not long have the charm of your society. Signor Vanari swears that he will expel you from Florence. I promise to intercede, but I am not sanguine of success."

"Spare your intercession, Sir Everard. I have exhausted Florence."

"And yourself too," he said to himself, as he lifted his hat and left her.

He had not the faintest notion that Mrs. Vanari, much less her daughters, knew any-

thing about the challenge which her husband had given and then withdrawn. So that, when he entered the little room where they sat, anxiously awaiting his arrival, he contented himself with whispering to the mother:

"It is all right: I have convinced him."

"I know that," she answered, "and more than that. I know all, and thank you and bless you."

Regina came round, and there, before mother and sister, stretched up on tiptoe and kissed him, and said that he must come with her into the garden.

"See, the moon has risen," she said, "and it is so warm, and sweet, and beautiful. We must have a farewell stroll in it."

"Come along, then, sister mine," he said, putting his arm round her, and feeling sure that she must have repeated to her mother all that had passed between them the preceding evening, about that very hour.

They walked round and round, Regina making him promise that he would be a true, true brother, would write to her often,

give her advice, help her, scold her, do anything, but always love her. Of course he would.

At length they sat upon a marble seat among the roses and the moonlight, where again she made him repeat all his promises. If he broke any one of them, she would never trust anybody again.

"Stay here, will you, just for a moment. I am going in, but will be with you directly."

"Very well."

"You promise to wait for me."

"Yes; certainly."

She tripped away, and ran up the steps that led from the garden to the little balcony, and thence into the room where the others were sitting. But sweet and dear as she was, she had scarcely quitted his side before his thoughts began to wander in a yet dearer, far dearer direction. The nightingales were singing, and the breath of the roses was soft and warm, and the beautiful clear moon—the same moon that he had seen up at La Vernia two nights ago—the same moon that he had seen last night in this very

spot, whilst Regina listened to his melancholy tale — was flooding the garden with light, and suffusing the air with refined splendour. Nature unfolded to him her rarest beauties, friends as true-hearted as ever lived were at that very moment bewailing his departure, and friends equally leal were to accompany his footsteps.

Were they all in vain? All completely, utterly in vain. Where, where was the presence, without which no moonlight was brightly bright, no roses sweetly sweet, no life more than living death? Idle was it to wonder why the touch of one hand only had magnetic power to shake and attract his soul—why one voice alone had far-stretching music enough to reach the depths and heights of his existence—one fair forbidden thing exclusive faculty to make or mar his happiness. Idle to wonder, yet still more idle to deny.

He heard the chords of a piano struck, and then a female voice. It was Regina's, singing with all her wonderful flexibility of voice and expression, this simple, but, perhaps, singular song:

I.

When, for a *buonamano*,*
Cometh at break of day
Knock at the *terzo piano*,†
A little voice answers,
Chi è?‡
"I, the facchino, awaiting
The bounty of *cara lei!*" §
She droppeth a paul through the grating,
And silently steals away.

II.

When with a long low mumble
Of lips that appear to pray,
At noon comes a knock—so humble—
The little voice answers,
Chi è?
"I, the poor monk." Just a little
She opens but nought doth say,
Gives him baiocchi or victual,
And silently steals away.

III.

But when, as the shadows longer
Stretch half athwart the way,
There cometh a knock—much stronger—
The little voice answers,
Chi è?
And when I answer her, "Io!" ‖
No bolts nor bars delay,
But with the wild whisper, Ah Dio!
We kiss and we steal away!

His eyes were turned in the direction of the strain, and as it finished, Regina appeared on the balcony, and seemed to be pointing out to her mother or Hilda—he could not

* Anglicè, "tip." † "Third story." ‡ "Who is it?"
§ Literally, "dear she." ‖ "I."

see which of them it was—where he was sitting. Immediately, the two descended into the garden; but instead of coming towards him, they took the path to the left, and disappeared behind the ilex hedges. He fell back again into the old, sad, hungering, unsatisfied thoughts, whilst the nightingales sang and sang above, around, beyond, in the Torrigiani Gardens, and in the smaller but equally beautiful enclosure where he sat, fruitlessly musing. Why did not Regina come back and chase thoughts, each moment becoming worse and worse to bear? At length they assumed definite shapes of horror. He saw gold-brown hair floating on the water—lying in dank grass—flaunting in——O, God! he would think no more. He would throw it off. But just as he was about to spring rather than rise from the marble seat, his wrists were seized, and he was almost forcibly thrust back into it.

"What is it, Regina dear?"

"It is not Regina," said a voice he knew, yet did not know, till he saw, prostrately beautiful at his feet and gazing wildly into his eyes, the pallid long-lost face of Lily Swetenham.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WHOLE TRUTH.

"WILL you hear me?" were the first words, after breaking, in the moonlight, upon his solitary misery.

"Yes; but sit—here—here!"

"No; better—here." And she half knelt, half crouched at his feet. She had withdrawn her lithe fingers from his wrists, when she saw he sat so quietly. He offered her his hand. She took it, and retained it in her grasp.

"You are generous to give it me without having heard me. But you are right. Credulous—incredulous, as I have been—foolish —mad—what you will—I think I almost still deserve it."

She looked so beautiful, he stroked her hair, which was wholly unconcealed, for she wore neither bonnet nor veil. She was plainly but, as ever, exquisitely dressed, and he thought she looked younger and more childlike than he had ever seen her look, or had ever thought of her as looking. Perhaps this was caused by her position at his feet.

"Tell me," he said.

"Where must I begin? Long before you knew me, I was a child all joy—such as I can distinctly remember myself. I remember, too, the change—change introduced by the fears and resolve of my mother. She is so good, so dear; always was so; and in anything that I say, do not think that I am accusing her. She is what she is. But, unfortunately, I was what I was—very different from her, but almost as incapable of change. The dominion which her singleness and uprightness of purpose, and force of character, soon gave her over dear papa, she long tried in vain to establish over me. She found me a determined and invincible rebel. He did his best to act the benevolent go-

between. She was not to be satisfied with any such small compromise. She was never severe with me; but she was as unflinching as a stone wall. I suppose I yielded about as much. Her superior tact, arising from age and from her position as mother, gave her a great advantage, so as to make it always appear that I was wrong and she right. *I* did not any the less *feel* right; and the only result was that papa and I were both made very miserable. She was too much engrossed by a rigid sense of what she thought her duty to be much troubled by my tearful moods or his painful perplexities. And so her firmness, though as yet it might have but a very slight effect on me, came to exercise predominant, and, finally, almost exclusive influence over him. By the time I was fifteen, I had—not one against me, but—two. She had thoroughly converted him; nor is it, indeed, surprising. Her stern, puritanic rule had made rebellion my normal state. She appeared to me in the light of my natural enemy, and I was as ready to disagree with and disobey her when she was right as when she was wrong. Put a sane

person into a madhouse, and I suppose he will end by becoming an idiot. Put the meekest of mankind in a cage, and he will strive to break the bars. Probably I was not by disposition very meek or very sane, but the treatment which was so unsuited to me had made me at last perfectly outrageous. So that I am not surprised that even my good dear father eventually thought me by nature what his wife had made me by habit. But when he began to turn his countenance from me, my wonderful courage also began to fail me. I could not stand alone—the odds seemed too great. Meanwhile, also, I was growing older, and if not wiser, at least more prudent. At sixteen I was convinced that opposition was useless; at seventeen I fancied that I had given in. What a delusion! I was becoming, if not a rank hypocrite, at least a very discreet girl. I did as I was told; I never contradicted an opinion from which I differed; I never asked for anything that I felt was likely to be refused. Peace at any price and a tolerable existence, had become my sole end. Papa resumed all his old gentleness; my mother seemed to

hold the reins all the tighter the less I pulled. So that I think the curb with which she ruled me hurt me still more than when I resisted: for then I was encouraged and cheered in my fierce struggle, whereas now I tamely submitted and was galled all the same. What I played, what I sung—my books, my prayers, my postures, my hours, my looks, my everything—she controlled, as though I had been a child. I endured it all: I was thoroughly beaten."

Again he stroked her warm, glossy hair. He would have given worlds to have done more, but dared not—yet! He only said:

"Go on."

"I was eighteen. We saw but little society, though papa is sociability itself. Mamma disapproved of it. But we often saw Philip Pemberton. Slowly, but surely, the dismal conviction closed in upon me that it was settled that I should marry him. I believe him to be the soul of honour——"

"He is that, and more."

"That it would ever have spontaneously occurred to him that he loved me, I do not believe, any more than it occurred to him to

refuse to do so when mamma told him. He was as much at her command as everybody else whom she long suffered to be about us. I dare say it would be difficult for any one not to like him, except a girl who was urged to do more; and it was only natural that he should be a favourite of papa's. I declare to you I almost hated him. Had he loved me of his own free suggestion I should have been becomingly grateful, though even then I might not have been stirred to more than an appreciation of the greatest compliment one person can pay another. But, I saw him—and, I am convinced, justly—as the man brought forward to be the crowning instrument and proof of my submission. He did not know it, or I should not speak of him as I do. Probably it is easy for a man with such a character and such limited experience as his to make his heart follow his fortunes; and being as good as told that he was to love me, he very likely did love me. Still, it is scarcely strange that I should hate him. More than this: I resolved that I would never marry him. I had no thoughts of re-opening the whole

question with mamma, and fighting every lost inch of ground over again. What was lost, was lost. But marry Mr. Pemberton I never would. Yet I had become so thoroughly submissive in everything else, that no doubt it was concluded I should quietly submit equally in this."

She stopped, and turned her face away. He did not stir. When she looked at him again, there were slight signs of tears in her eyes, and a heightened colour in her face.

"You came. I was surprised at the cordiality with which you were received and continued to be received till you first went abroad. I can only attribute it to your being exceedingly cautious—this I saw at once—and (please pardon me) rather plausible. Mamma liked you; papa was genuinely fond of you. But your very caution, increasing as it did, was the first thing that excited in me what I will own were pleasant suspicions. You once told me that you loved me; and in answer to you, I did not conceal that I loved you. I spoke then the simple truth, whatever cause you may have had to doubt it since. I

will, therefore, believe that you also spoke truth, though I have for a time utterly disbelieved it, as my conduct proves. I will own that I hailed in you not only one whom I could love, but a possible deliverer. Under your courteous deference to my parents I could see clearly enough your complete disagreement and divergence. Rightly or wrongly, I attributed it for the most part to your prudent affection for me——"

"You attributed it rightly," he said.

"—and imagined that you saw my peculiar position as thoroughly as I saw the motive of your behaviour. What a seven months had I in your absence! You returned. You had lost ground in the mean time. How, I do not know; but it was plain that you had lost it. Again your prudence regained it. So evident was it that neither papa nor mamma had the faintest notion that you loved me, that I began to fear my wishes had been father to my thoughts, and that in reality your discretion was nothing more than well-educated indifference. I, too, had experienced a pretty good training in the art of conceal-

ing my sentiments; and though I now suffered tortures——"

"I never intended to inflict them," he said, tenderly.

"—no one was allowed to guess them," she continued, without noticing his interruption. "Events shortly occurred to increase them. Do you remember meeting papa and me one morning, and introducing a friend of yours?"

"Ambrose Champion?"

"Yes. I have now to speak of him." Sir Everard started. She clenched his hand closely. "Be patient, please, and—be calm. I met him again, when I was out riding with the groom. He, too, was on horseback. He addressed me, recalling the introduction, and mentioning your name. I could not refuse his conversation; and his connexion with you made it only too welcome: for it was on the preceding evening that you had given me the first—though necessarily clandestine—sign of real affection. Do you remember?"

"You mean when I held your hand in mine," he said.

"Yes. Was it wonderful that I helped him to talk when he talked of you? At first he delighted my only too eager ears with enthusiastic praise, such as I have never heard man bestow on man. He spoke of your abilities, and language seemed to fail him in his estimate of their value. You could do anything, he said; and that you would do much in your time, and leave your print upon the age, was certain. For ambition was your madness: hidden under whatever polished exterior, it was your ruling, your only passion. I remarked that, so far as I had enjoyed opportunities of noticing you, the graces of life and of speculation—neither of them very closely allied with the purposes of ordinary ambition—seemed anything but matters to you of indifference. With these, he replied, you played. Your versatility was infinite; and you filled up the moments of waiting between the conception of a scheme and its execution with the first toys that came in your way, or with the trifles most palatable to those who happened to be about you. When I suggested that I thought you had too tender

a nature to be what is ordinarily understood by a merely ambitious man, he laughed aloud, and declared his amusement at my misconception. You were far too much in earnest, too concentrated in your aims, too steady of purpose, to indulge in anything, and least of all in tenderness, that did not bear you nearer to your goal. And all this he said as though he were still your panegyrist, not your accuser. Already his words wounded me to the heart. But I could not blame, much less silence him: for how should he know — and I could not tell him—that I loved you? He envied you, he said. He could not pretend to the possession of your genius; but had he been blessed with your obdurate power of making all minor schemes subserve the greater ones of life, he might by this have achieved something. He made me and left me uncomfortable. He asked me if I rode often. I gave him such an answer as made it easy for him to come across me in my rides, if he were so minded. In my heart I hoped he would be; for though he had pained he had allured me. To say to mamma that I had

met and conversed with him would have only been a superfluous invitation to her to lecture me, probably to circumscribe the only freedom I ever had—that of riding out alone, with only a groom behind me. Had I found the opportunity, I should probably have alluded to it to you. But you never came for more than three weeks; and the next time I saw you was on the morning when you avowed your love."

She paused as though she expected him to say something at this period of her narration, and as though there was something which *he* ought to explain. He told her that he had purposely stayed away during the three weeks which elapsed between the evening of their first fond long linking of hands, and the evening of which she now spoke, in order that Pemberton might urge his claims, and he might be sure of their fate before he urged his own.

"Yes—yes!" she said; "but how could I guess that, then? especially when there was a voice at my side to aggravate my fears and provoke foul suspicions? If you did not seek me, your so-called friend did. Four

times during these three weeks did he come upon me in my rides; and each time we talked of *you*. Your ambitious nature was still his theme; but more and more, admiration for your intellect and strength of character glided into depreciation and reprehension of your moral nature, and regret that capacity so large should be wedded to self-seeking so small. I took up your defence, clumsily no doubt; and only betrayed by my awkwardness that I imagined in you traits other than intellectual, and for these had been girl enough to love you. I had but given him the opportunity he sought. He could not hide the truth from me, he said. It was such a shame, that he must put me on my guard. He was, he owned, your confidant; and he soon showed by referring to what had occurred at The Slopes, that in this at least he was speaking the truth. You cared for me, he said, as much as you could care for any girl; but your preference of me was due to my being able to forward your ambition. He was not very delicate; he made me to the full understand what was my value in your eyes.

I was indignant at having allowed him to drag me into conversation which could end thus; but it was too late to retreat. I did not believe him; at least I told him that I did not. But when I was alone, the dread of its being true was so great that I could not discard the suspicion. The belief that you loved me, and the hope that you would eventually be my deliverer, had re-opened life. I felt that, if what he said *were* true, love and life were both closed for ever. When I saw him next, not your love but his—his—was his talk. I wonder if such impassioned language often issues from men's lips! It fell on my ears in vain; or scarcely in vain—for it roused me to rude anger. I told him to his face that he had striven to undermine in order to supplant you, and that, young as I might be, I could not be made the dupe of so shallow an artifice. He was sorry, he was grieved. Time would show; he could afford to wait. But he should not have to wait long; neither should I. You professed, he said, full confidence in having won my affections, but you feared that you might not obtain my parents'

consent; and you had laughed to scorn the idea of marrying me without, since the chief object for which you proposed to marry me would probably in that case be lost. And this, if my parents raised insuperable difficulties, I should soon know for myself. Meanwhile, he should cherish his own disinterested passion, and hope almost against hope that the destruction of an illusion might make him, though unworthy, not so unacceptable in my eyes. You hurt me!" she said, with a start of pain.

Delafosse had been repressing his passion; and in so doing had unconsciously been squeezing her hand, that was still in his, as in a vice. He looked and saw what physical pain he must have inflicted. He raised it towards his lips; but she held it back, saying:

"No, not now—or I shall not be able to tell you all. Let me go on. That night I did not sleep: I lay awake striving to solve the painful puzzle whether you loved me really or in the manner which he had described. No amount of thought could solve it, and could only leave me more miserable,

and at the best in agonising doubt. I recalled all your conduct from first to last, before you went abroad and after your return, the ease with which you left me, your recent three weeks' absence at a time when I thought I had at last received a genuine proof of your affection and had therefore acquired a sort of claim to your presence. The next day I firmly—kindly I trust but firmly—refused Philip Pemberton. I had often anticipated the results of an occurrence which I was certain was on the way; but the results were far worse than I had ever looked forward to. It was clear that if life at home had hitherto been a contradiction of my instincts, now it was and would henceforth be positive torture. Another night, as sleepless as the preceding, was passed in still more anxious wondering whether you were to be my deliverer. The next day I saw you, and you formally declared your love. Do you remember my asking you before we parted if you *really* loved me?"

"Well. And do you remember my answer? Heaven knows it was a true one!"

"That you loved me with all the passionate fervour of a boy united to the calm conviction of a man. I believed you; and even more when you had quitted than when you were riding by my side. I could not altogether rid myself of the presence of suspicions which had tormented me for so many days; but on the whole I was happier than I had ever been in my life, during the week which elapsed between that interview and our next—and last. Twice during that week, however, he whom you had unfortunately made your confidant, forced himself upon my solitary rides. I had not spoken of him that morning to you. Was it natural that I should do so? To have alluded to his insinuations at all would have been difficult; to allude to them properly, without a moment's reflection of how it must be done, impossible. Whether he spoke truth or falsehood, silence was best; since I thought your own conduct would soon confirm or destroy his assertions. This he himself pointed out. He repeated to me all that had passed between you and me, said that my parents' reception of my refusal of

Mr. Pemberton had made you almost despair of gaining their consent, and showed beyond doubt that you had talked the whole matter over with him often and long. You had declared to him that nothing should induce you to marry me without their consent, as you were not fool enough to marry me for myself alone. He then re-urged his love, which he said was of so different a character. You would never fly with me: he would. He drove me wild. I was sure of your love, I answered. Dare I test it? If so, let me offer to leave home with you. The words fell on willing ears. I thought I saw my liberty. My treatment at home had made me prepared for any course, however extravagant. I saw you again. You had been driven from The Slopes for ever. You know what passed the next day. I placed myself in your hands: I offered to go with you where and when you would. You refused, and confirmed in my bewildered brain the worst suspicions which had been implanted there. Confident in your love, I had already half promised him who had suggested them, that, if they turned out to

be just, I would concede to him what should first have been refused by you. I felt so confident that it would not be refused. With your refusal, belief in your love abandoned me and left me stranded. Worse than that; I was wild with the agony and humiliation of reflecting that I had exposed the fulness of my love to one who exposed in answer what seemed the smallness of his. If I could only get away, do something, go somewhere, die, or commit moral suicide, so that I might be really dead without dying! Every one, it seemed, had turned against me, with the exception of him who again wildly urged his love, and at last wrung from me a promise of flight. I did not love him in the least; I don't know what I felt for him; grateful, I suppose. I grasped at the only outlook of love and liberty, and resolved to give him the devotion and obedience of a wife."

She looked into Sir Everard's face, which had grown cold and hard as the marble on which he sat. He let go of her hand.

"Nay," she said, "why do you repel me, *now?* If you had done so at first or before

this period of my story, I could not have blamed you. But now! Believe me you have *already heard the worst.*"

"Do you know, Lily, all that those words can convey to me?"

She closed her eyes and said slowly:

"Thoroughly. I am not his wife; but I am yet not unworthy to be the wife of that man who can forgive all that I have so far told you. My greatest fault was and still is, to have disbelieved *you.*" She re-opened her pure, tear-bathed eyes. "My last fault was to have left my father's house. I have committed no blunder since, unless being here is a fresh one."

He clasped his hands at the back of her head, and tenderly kissed her forehead.

"I fled with him and his sister, whom, of course, I never before had seen, and whom he then introduced."

Sir Everard started, and uttered the name of Rosie.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Go on, Lily."

"He told me that he had made every due preparation, and her presence was, of course,

part of it. We travelled by night from London to Boulogne."

"But how did you get to town?"

"I slipped away from home immediately after the afternoon service that Sunday, was met by them both about a mile from The Slopes, and then we drove about twenty miles, taking the mail to London at a place called Bonnington, where there was no chance of our being known or noticed. We spent but a couple of hours in town, and crossed the Channel that night."

"Did you write, or get anybody to write to me, as if from you?"

"No," she answered; "certainly not. Did you receive any letter professing to come from me?"

"Yes; two. But go on. *He* did it all, no doubt."

"He had told me that our marriage would be solemnised the morning of our arrival at Boulogne. When we arrived, he said that difficulties had arisen which he had not foreseen, and that, on the whole, he had better write to my father, and try to get his consent. I was silent; but I was now too keenly alive to the peculiarity of my position to

neglect every precaution to surround it with all possible safeguards. I told him firmly that until he came to make me his wife, I should refuse even to see him. I took lodgings for myself at once. He did not seem to mind this, except that it was, he said, more expensive. For three weeks I never stirred out of doors, and never saw him. I had four short notes from him, saying each time that he had communicated with my parents, but could obtain no reply."

Doubtless these notes, Delafosse thought, were the grounds for Mr. Swetenham continuing to believe that he knew all the time where Lily was. He would naturally connect Ambrose Champion with the man who had once introduced him, and conclude that the one was merely playing the game of the other.

"At last he hinted, in the fourth note, that he was willing to release me from my promise, and help me return home. I did not answer it, and I have never seen nor heard of him since."

"But his sister."

"After the first week, I refused to see her

either, though she vowed she had been led by him into giving her assistance in the belief that he loved me, and that I loved him. He was behaving infamously, she said, and she would do what she could to help me."

"Did she know anything about *me?*"

"Not from my lips; I never mentioned you, and after the first week, I say, I refused to see her, and have never seen her since."

"Then were you entirely alone?"

"No; not entirely. I had Marie—a servant only; a servant found in my lodgings, but the dearest, most devoted creature that ever lived, who from that day to this has never deserted me, and is in Florence with me now."

"But how did you live?"

"You sent me money—did you not?"

"I! How could I send it? I utterly failed to discover where you were."

"I thought it must be you. I received a hundred and fifty pounds, with a note saying that a like sum would be sent every year on the same date to the Poste Restante at Boulogne, so long as it continued to be claimed."

"Who could have sent it? Your papa, perhaps."

"It was not in his writing. I supposed it was yours, though it was unsigned. See, it is here."

He turned it to the moonlight. It consisted of about twenty words, saying what Lily told him, but nothing more. But it was unmistakably the same handwriting that he had so often seen in the manuscript lying on the table of old Hannah's cottage. It was written by Rosie Raffles.

"His sister sent it you," he said. "It is her handwriting."

"Had I known that, I should not have used it. As it was, I made certain that it was from you; and I felt that all I could do to atone to you for my conduct, was meekly to use it, and in that, at least, to obey your wishes. So certain was I that it came from you, that Marie at last persuaded me to travel, with her as my companion, to Batterton, seek you out, confess my fault, and claim your forgiveness, even if you had nothing more to give."

"You came!"

"We did. How I remember every in-

cident of that night! It was bright moonlight, and we approached The Hold through Batterton woods. We reached it. There was a light in one of the rooms, and the windows were wide open. Better to enter thus, I said to Marie. I heard your voice—you were singing. You stopped, and I was on the point of entering, when I heard another voice, and then saw another figure—a woman's! I paused—I watched. In another moment I saw her in your arms, and in another I hurried Marie away. I saw in this scene but a confirmation of my original fears, and of the truth of Ambrose Champion's assertion — however false he might have been in all else—that you had never loved me. I tried to forget you, but I remembered my own love, and was haunted by what—believe me—was the keenest pain of all—the constant vision of your supposed unworthiness."

"I can explain all that," he said.

"I do not doubt it now, in the least," she answered; "but I do not ask for, I do not even want, the explanation. I have sinned through want of faith, and faith alone can

procure me pardon. I came with Marie to Italy—to Florence. I have been here ever since. Only to-day I knew for certain how wicked were all my doubts when I doubted *you*, and now I am—here! You know all —*all*—that you have to forgive. Everard! do you forgive it?"

He raised her from the ground and folded her to his heart, as she burst into a tempest of happy tears.

"Regina! Regina!" he called.

Her hurrying steps were heard along the path.

"I have found Lily! I have found Lily! Here—here——"

"I have found her for you, brother mine, you mean, without going round the world to seek her."

"*You* brought her here!"

"Yes; this is my drawing-mistress, my friend, my——"

"Your sister, dear, you mean—does she not, Everard?"

"Yes, my darling! because I am her brother, and you will shortly be my wife."

CHAPTER XIV.

ALL'S WELL.

So Countess won her bet, and had her pick of the earrings on the Ponte Vecchio, and in them looks lovelier than ever. But the Franciscan friar remains undisturbed amid the snow and pines of La Vernia, without the comfort of knowing that Heaven has set right the wrong which he, as worthless in his penitence as in his evil doing, never dreamed of attempting to repair.

"Quite right, Everard, old boy!" said Narracott—"quite right to leave the scoundrel alone to his '*flebile*.' But just to think of it! That a fellow one has brushed past in Fleet-street, whose 'copy' one has read and accepted, whom one has liquored-up with and laughed at, should be getting up every

night at two o'clock, and doing that sort o' game in the dark, passes my poor understanding. I can fancy myself the Tycoon, or King Pepple, or Jack Ketch, or a lord in waiting, or in any other dignified and important position. But doing '*flebile!*'—that's quite beyond me."

The hundred and fifty pounds *were* from Rosie Raffles, who was quite prepared to keep her promise, and, concealing the real giver, to send the same amount to the same place every year. What she told Lily was likewise true. She had been Champion's slave all her life, but he had not ventured to tell her the truth before ensuring her co-operation in the attempted marriage. The real truth she did not know—and part of it, even then, she could only suspect—till Delafosse had told her as much as concerned himself that autumn afternoon, the second or third time they rode together through the leafy woods. But, by that time, she knew no more than Sir Everard himself where Lily Swetenham was, and was much too far advanced in her own love and craving for him, to tell him what might

endanger the ambition of her heart without at all mitigating the sorrow of his. All the rest of her conduct was due, partly to her acquired habit of giving in to Ambrose, and partly to her fear that, if she demurred, he would baulk the one scheme on which she had set her affections. She failed, but the endeavour was not so blameworthy after all; and you must be much harder-hearted than I am if you are not pleased to be able to think that she is, by this time, quite consoled, that she is still a very popular authoress, and has married her former critic, Marston Light. He no longer abuses her—in print.

The intended weeks of travel were foregone, and Narracott and his wife at once escorted Lily Swetenham straight to England. Sir Everard, of course, journeyed with them. But there was a fifth to the party in the person of Regina Benvenuto. They left Mr. and Mrs. Vanari wholly reconciled, the Signor having become, for an Italian, an absolutely model husband. Harry Destrier promises to be a successful painter of pictures, and is much assisted by

having the loveliest of models in the person of pretty, blushing, simple-minded Hilda. The Marquise de Bonnefoi left Florence; but her worst punishment was yet to come. Her husband has become a confirmed invalid, requiring constant nursing, and has at last remembered that he possesses a wife, and never allows her now to quit his side.

Sir Everard, on arriving in England, went straight to The Hold. Regina remained in town with Countess, and Lily was taken, both at her own and her lover's request, to Mrs. Pemberton's. The dear placid old lady received her with open arms, and Philip was as chivalrous as ever. Deborah had secured the curate, and could now afford to be generous; whilst Kate had at last made up her mind to be an old maid, and wisely determined to be a kindly instead of a spiteful one. All four—or rather all five, for the Rev. Augustus Tomlinson accompanied them—stormed The Slopes, and brought Mr. and Mrs. Swetenham, now only too glad to be convinced, to ultimate reason. Time, the magical mitigator of all extreme feelings and opinions, had softened the

mother's judgment and mellowed the father's heart; so that all the poor old fellow could say was:

"Where is she, where is she? Bring her to me, bring her to me, and him too—that's all!"

So Rymington bells were rung once more, but more bravely and merrily than they had ever yet been rung, and all the country-side trooped in, lads and lassies, children in hobnailed shoes, Hodge in his best, and Hodge's wife in still better, to see the fair Lily and the handsome baronet made one from that day out. There was another sermon from the Vicar, in which there were fewer texts from Scripture than in the other one preached that terrible Sunday afternoon, but which, I will take leave to say, contained quite as sound doctrine.

"Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder," was this time his text. And though ever and anon he perhaps again rushed into extreme positions, such as people will rush into when they preach from pulpit, or altar-step, or from any other disadvantage-ground, where there is no one

to pull them up and contradict them, it would have done you no harm to have heard it.

It was of considerable length—too long indeed to be reproduced here. But it ended with a panegyric of conjugal love. To love one woman and one only—that was the best thing a man could possibly do; and to love one man and one only—that was the best thing a woman could do. It was a profane, not a sacred, author who said that "Love is Heaven, and Heaven is Love," but he was none the less right. It was often urged that the poor and the uneducated and the profligate, had not the same chance as the rest of mankind; but the objection could not hold. For love was within the reach of all, and love was at once the greatest happiness, the highest knowledge, and the loftiest virtue. Before its sacred dominion, pride of rank, prejudice of wealth, and obstinacy of opinion, must bow down, so that all might co-operate in carrying out the divine mandate with which he had started—"Whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

This was the Vicar's retractation, though the admiring congregation, saving those who were gathered immediately about the communion rails, did not know it for such. It had its effect nevertheless, and made more than reparation to the parish for the girls' tears and boys' empty stomachs which it will be remembered were the result of the terrible sermon preached a year ago. Some dozen timorous bucolic swains thereby took heart at last to ask as many coquettish lasses to keep company with them; these remembering the Vicar's words, laid aside their plaguy tricks, and consented to talk about naming the day; and four or five pig-headed old fellows dratted it very extensively, but gave in at length, for peace sake, to what appeared suddenly to have become the universal parochial opinion.

Regina is living at The Hold with her dear brother and sister, Sir Everard and Lady Delafosse. The first has become a shocking teaze and is always asking Philip Pemberton to dinner. Philip is far more confused in Regina's presence than he ever was in that of Lily, and I feel convinced that he is

over head and ears in love—this time, quite spontaneously—with the fascinating little Florentine. That he will some day find courage to tell her so, I am morally certain, and Regina will do whatever "brother mine" thinks best. What he will tell her to do may easily be guessed.

Everard himself is writing a poem founded on the story which he heard at the Sagro Eremo from the Prior of Camaldoli, and Lily is his critic; honest and severe, but loving and sympathetic, as a critic, who wants to do good, should ever strive to be. Whether these combined labourers will produce a valuable addition to the literature of their land, remains to be seen. But there is little doubt, if any, that their joint blood will be perpetuated in a long line of brave English boys and comely English daughters.

THE END.

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